

BORROWED HORSES, A NOVEL

by

SIÂN B. GRIFFITHS

(Under the Direction of Judith Ortiz Cofer and Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

In this novel, I retell part of the story of Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece, *Jane Eyre*, to explore how women negotiate gender, identity, and power in contemporary times. The characters of Jane Eyre and Rochester are blended and confused into a new icon for present day femininity: Joannie Edson, a radiographer who can see into the insides of people, imaging their bones, but who struggles to see more vital information about their thoughts, their feelings, their passions, and their madnesses.

INDEX WORDS: Novel, Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, Edward Rochester, Gender, Idaho, Radiography, Horses, Hunter/Jumper, Equestrian

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DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to Nathanael and Gwendolyn Myers, who were patient through all the times when my mind went riding off to Idaho. To paraphrase Billy Joel, when I was deep inside of me, you weren't too disturbed, and you didn't ask for nothing while I was gone.

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PREFACE

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes that “We think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure” (76). While I disagree that great men are “useless” for the woman writer, Woolf wisely points out the historical, genealogical relationship between a text and its predecessors. As Woolf puts it, “books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately” (80). Writers build from the blocks our forefathers and foremothers provide. My novel, *Borrowed Horses*, exemplifies this endeavor in the most literal of ways. In writing it, I have revisited *Jane Eyre*, the work of one of my favorite writing “mothers,” Charlotte Brontë. I borrow from her plot, her fictional autobiographical form, her characters, and her tropes to explore how the concerns she raised in her novel are still present and vital in women’s lives, despite the strides towards gender equity we have made since the Victorian era.

Yet, to borrow one of Brontë’s favorite metaphors, I have not slavishly fettered myself to her original work. I could not possibly hope to top her achievement, and attempting to produce a carbon copy of her text seems, to me, both reductive and restrictive. I have no wish to simply put *Jane Eyre* in a contemporary setting. Instead, I have used her novel as a garden, picking the necessary fruits that will best feed my project and leaving much that is succulent and tempting on the vine. Again, I’m stealing metaphors, this time from Alice Walker. Walker points to her mother’s garden as a display of creativity and genius, offering it as a possible text to fill the void of women’s texts that Woolf mourns. As she uses her mother’s garden for writing inspiration, I use Brontë, one of my many writing mothers.

Books, like gardens, feed us. My main character, Joannie Edson, will also revisit her mother's garden, helping her mother to feed the garden with horse manure (metaphorically, the "shit" we endure as women and as humans) that will transform tired soil into something fertile and loamy, something to enrich her produce. The women are sustained by this garden, both physically and psychologically, just as the works of my writing mothers have sustained me through the writing of my book.

"Je"

Part of the lasting appeal of *Jane Eyre* is owed to the voice of its fascinating first person, eponymous narrator. Constantly negotiating between her need to voice her identity and her society's need for her to silence herself, between her "hunger, rebellion, and rage" and the repulsion that the expression of these feelings would evoke in her fellows, Jane's narration of her life's story balances her need to speak the "truth" with the narrative moderations required by her audience. As Lisa Sternlieb illustrates in her article, "*Jane Eyre*: Hazarding Confidences," Jane begins these moderations as a child when she recounts the abuses of her adoptive home, Gateshead, to her sympathetic teacher, Miss Temple. Jane learns that toning down the passion of her narrative and hiding the most disturbing parts of the story makes her audience more receptive to her tale. At the novel's close, we will see her again enact this strategy. Rejoining Rochester and recounting her life during her absence from him, Jane edits out the privation and starvation she faced in the immediate days after leaving Thornfield, fearing that to include this information would cause him too much pain. A crucial element of Jane's growth is learning how to revise a story.

Indeed, Sandra M. Gilbert has shown how such deletions of fervent sentiment are evident in the narrative structure itself, pointing to the madwoman's interruption of what Adrienne Rich calls Brontë's "feminist manifesto" (Rich 475), Jane's rooftop speech calling for greater freedom and activity for women and arguing for a release from the repressive domestic space. Jane's problem, her entrapment in feminine domesticity, is illustrated through the madwoman's attic prison, but Jane will not say as much. Such words cannot be spoken. They are replaced by Bertha Rochester's gruesome, mirthless laughter, a bitter but fruitless act of rebellion.

Sternlieb's article raises (but does not answer) an interesting question: why does the madwoman continually return to her prison? Bertha Rochester is perfectly capable of escaping her prison, as she shows numerous times during Jane's stay at Thornfield. She shreds Jane's veil only to mysteriously return to her attic; she twice starts fires but never runs from the mansion. I would like to suggest that Bertha Rochester is captive, not merely of Rochester, but of herself. To escape the literal attic space, she must first escape her mental attic, and this, she seems incapable of doing. Likewise, Jane's domestic entrapment, like the madwoman's, is partially self-imposed.

When Jane learns to silence herself through editing, when she decides to privilege audience over the complete truth, she limits her own freedom, imprisoning herself. She contains her desires in order to reduce the threat her feelings pose to the society in which she dwells. If we are to blame the patriarchy for stifling women's liberty, we must realize that the patriarchy exists in the minds and hearts of women as well as in the minds and hands of men. Using our feet, walking away from the prison cell, requires this recognition and a massive effort of will.

Like Jane, my character, Joannie Edson, will vacillate between her desire for freedom and her desire to incorporate herself into a larger social order. Often, she silences herself rather than

speaking. For instance, Joannie repeatedly swallows information about her relationship with Dave, Jenny's husband, because she knows that speaking would upset the relationships she has formed with the other characters. While Joannie insists that she needs no society and that happiness is available without others, she fears total social isolation. Her actions bring about the revelation of the truth that she is otherwise unable to voice. She plans the dinner that will bring all parties together and, she hopes, free her from the burden of her relationship with Dave without the necessity of breaking her silence.

I put Joannie's decision in terms of Brontë's metaphors of captivity: "If my prison was self-imposed, then a prison break should be easy./ *Steal the key when the guard is sleeping*, I thought as I lay down and pulled the quilt over me. Catch him by surprise" (233). Just as Brontë's heroine and madwoman return to domesticity in spite of their wish for freedom, Joannie wraps herself in an emblem of the domestic: her quilt. Her quilt, however, is also a reminder of her mother, who made it and who has left her own repressive social and a familial order based on bigotry and hate to forge a new kind of life for herself. Thus, the domestic emblem is not necessarily a constrictive one; rather, it is an emblem of a womanhood characterized by strength if not by the voicing of that strength.

Joannie's hope to evade speaking will be thwarted; events will not allow Joannie to keep her silence. Joannie will disrupt the tenuous calm of her social group, first by arranging this calamitous dinner and then by speaking the unwelcome truth, revealing her sexual relationship with Jenny's husband and thereby admitting her own sexuality, a sexuality she's tried to deny. Though she has a working life outside of the home and the ability to move at her own discretion (the very things for which Jane Eyre longs in her rooftop speech), Joannie is still haunted by the specters of silence that haunt our modern womanhood.

Joannie's story, like Jane's, is a journey to forging identity and coming to terms with one's conflicting desires. For this reason, it was important to maintain Jane Eyre's initials, J.E., when I created Joannie Edson. In Brontë's novel, Jane flees the bigamous relationship proposed by Rochester and adopts a pseudonym so that she can live unknown. The name she chooses, Jane Elliot, allows her to retain her initials, a fact that gains relevance because Jane Eyre speaks French. Thus, whether Jane Eyre or Jane Elliot, she is still "je," or "I," and retains her identity as an individual. Alternatively, by accepting marriage to either Edward Rochester or St. John Rivers, she will become J.R., or jr., subordinate to her husband.

Her acceptance of Rochester's marital proposal must come after he has been lowered, deprived of a property, of his sight, and of a hand by his mad-wife, and after she has been raised, inheriting an independence. Even still, we find her absorbed by her marriage, too busy even to raise Rochester's ward Adèle because, as she says, "my time and cares were now required by another—my husband needed them all" (383). Jane has gone from being governess to a girl to being governess to her husband, and has traded the Indian missionary offered by Rivers for a domestic missionary post. She makes the decision to marry Rochester in part to save her own life, fearing death abroad if she marries Rivers, but the marriage still entails a sacrifice on her part. Jane's protestations that she is equal to her disabled husband are not quite born out by the tableau she offers, a tableau of servitude if not dependence.

Joannie Edson is faced with a similar possibility: a mercenary marriage to Dr. John Rivers that would allow her to purchase the expensive horses that would serve her equestrian goals. She will refuse this option, knowing instinctively that this marriage would exact a cost. While she would maintain her identity as a rider, she feels she would have to moderate other parts of her identity to suit her husband. We see this best in the party scene at St. John's home in

which she becomes so unsure of herself that her attempts to speak are forced and unfortunate. She flees the party, angry at being put in a position where she feels she must be someone other than who she is. As with Jane Eyre, Joannie values the preservation of her identity over nearly every other concern.

Ed's Son

Joannie Edson is not merely the literary offspring of Jane Eyre but also of Edward Rochester, as her surname suggests. Indeed, her story (at least in terms of plot) bears more similarity to his story than to Jane's. Like Rochester, she has returned from a foray into the world (Rochester's move to the West Indies, Joannie's to New Jersey) that seemed to promise much but which resulted only in lasting bitterness and complicated feelings towards home. Like Rochester, Joannie has a mad person, Dave, whom she hides from the community in her metaphorical attic who will burn down her most treasured place (Connie's barn), killing Foxfire, her horse, in the process. Like Rochester, she searches for love in spite of the madman/woman's presence, knowing that s/he poses an impediment to future love. Like Rochester, she is sympathetic to the madness that consumes the mad person and avoids giving direct injury.

I have fused Jane and Rochester for a number of reasons, among which is my desire to explore the shifting notion of gender in the new world in the new millennium. Just as Rochester's gender is flexible (as we see in the famous scene where he cross-dresses as an elderly gypsy woman to torment Jane and his other female houseguests), Joannie Edson is not restricted to a stereotypical femininity. As an athlete, she does not mind getting both sweaty and dirty; in fact, she *prefers* getting sweaty and dirty to other, more typically "feminine" behaviors.

Joannie does not spend time at malls; she does not paint her nails or care if they break; she does not spend half the day on the phone. In short, she does not behave in any of the ways in which the typical “chick lit” heroine behaves. Joannie Edson is no Bridget Jones.

I’ve broken with these conventions of contemporary chick lit heroine-isms for several reasons, not the least of which is that the stereotypes they posit simply do not reflect many of the women I know. In her novel *Shirley*, Brontë’s eponymous heroine complains about the ways in which women are portrayed in novels by male authors, saying

If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an illusion about women: they do not read them in a true light; they misapprehend them, both for good and evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend. [...] Fine and divine it may be, but often quite artificial—false as the rose in my best bonnet there. (352)

Shirley asserts that women write women characters who are much closer to life, but I wonder if this is necessarily the case? After all, what is Bertha Rochester, if not a fiend? Even Brontë’s own Caroline Helstone, the other heroine in *Shirley*, often seems half doll, half angel—in fact, she increasingly moves towards this model of femininity as the novel progresses and she loses the spunk and health she has earlier in the novel. Polly Home in Brontë’s final novel, *Villette*, makes a similar journey from fascinating character to boring type. Brontë herself recognized this disappointing development of Polly’s character when she complained that “the weakest character in the book is the one I aimed at making the most beautiful” (*Villette* xxi).

Certainly, I find little connection between many of the female characters who populate the shopping- and cell phone-centered narratives of so many new novels (the novels bound in

fuchsia with pictures of high-heeled shoes on the covers that line the newly released table at Borders or Barnes and Noble) and the strong, determined women I have met in my daily life. The problem with women characters does not seem to simply lay in the sex of the author, as Brontë's Shirley Keeldar suggests, but in the gesture towards making these heroines "feminine," complete with all the vapidty and weakness that label still, unfortunately, implies.

With Joannie Edson and her female friends, I have tried to move away from stereotype towards what I feel is more true to my experience. Joannie, Dawn, and Connie are Western girls. They are tough and unflinching. While Dawn meticulously styles her mile-high hair each day, she is not afraid to ruin her hairstyle by cramming it under a riding helmet at day's end. Outside of the barn, Dawn is a hunter who has, like so many Idaho women, grown up with a rifle and a thorough knowledge of how to use it. Connie, though she will mother those who are hurt or injured, is a self-reliant widow, whose mourning of her husband expresses itself not in tears but in a benign alcoholism. Even Jenny, representative of a more traditional womanhood, balances her seeming angelic domesticity with calculated manipulation of her husband.

Joannie is perhaps the least feminine of all. Her character owes a debt to characters created by some of my writing mothers of nineteenth-century novels. Jane Austen's Catherine Morland in her first novel, *Northanger Abbey*, is similarly boyish. Austen writes that "She was fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose bush" (5). Similarly, Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* resists the assigned childhood appearance and amusements expected of her. Even her hair will not curl like other girls' hair: "Maggie was incessantly tossing her head to keep the dark, heavy locks out of her gleaming black eyes—an action which gave her very much the air of a small Shetland pony" (18). When

told to “go on with your patchwork, like a little lady,” Maggie replies, “I don’t *want* to do my patchwork” (18). Neither girl behaves like a girl should but romps and plays like boys do. Yet in both cases, their gender deviancy will resolve itself by the time the girls reach sexual maturity. They will learn to silence their voices, to sit still and work, to keep their dresses and hair neat, and, in fine, to behave like ladies.

Joannie, on the other hand, will not be trained out of her unfeminine behavior. Although we don’t see any glimpses of her childhood and only see a few scenes from her adolescence, her adulthood confirms that she has been allowed a license her literary predecessors were not. Her mother does not ask Joannie to “do her patchwork,” though she herself does patchwork. Instead, she allows Joannie to ride. Again, when choosing this sport, I had gender very much in mind. Equestrian events were the first Olympic sport in which men and women competed on equal terms, and it remains one of the few sports where the playing field is not sexually segregated. In America, women have come to dominate the sport (compared to many European countries, where men still comprise the majority of members on the national teams).

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft suggests that “we should hear of none of [the] infantine airs [of typical femininity], if girls were allowed to take sufficient exercise, and not confined in close rooms until their muscles are relaxed, and their powers of digestion destroyed” (191). Like Brontë, she argues that women need physical exercise to attain mental stability. Confinement is not conducive to sensible, rational behavior. “To carry the remark still further,” Wollstonecraft writes, “if fear in girls were treated in the same manner as cowardice in boys, we should quickly see women in more dignified aspects.” Joannie Edson, who continually finds solace through exercise, will not tolerate cowardice or laziness in herself. She judges herself by the “male” virtues that Wollstonecraft argued women *should* strive for.

Running and riding are feminist actions, though Joannie is unconscious of posing any radical challenges through these behaviors. Unlike so many contemporary heroines, she does not exercise to please men but to please herself, to give herself space to think.

The history of women's running is an interesting one. It was in the late Victorian era, March of 1896, that the first woman, Stamatis Rovithi, ran a marathon, covering the proposed Olympic course from Marathon to Athens (Lovett). And yet, until as recently as the 1980s, there were no women's distance races in the Olympics. The 1,500 meter race began as an Olympic event only in 1972. In 1966, Roberta Gibb became the first woman to complete the Boston Marathon when she sneaked onto the course, having "been inspired to run by the return of her race entry with a note saying that women were not physically capable of running a marathon" (Lovett). Running, as we see from its history, is an act of defiance. When women run long distances, Wollstonecraft's words calling for a more active womanhood hang in the air around them.

Women's riding has a longer history, but it is similarly troubled by assumptions of female weakness. Unlike Joannie, Romantic and Victorian-era women were confined to the side-saddle. As Donna Landry points out,

the side-saddle functioned both as sign and machine of gender difference. The use of the side-saddle at once presupposes and ensures women's athletic inferiority. [...] The assumption that women's physique and muscles are such that they need the extra security provided by the side-saddle seat goes hand in hand with assumptions of their general weakness, of femininity as invalidity. (58)

Joannie, like most women today, rides astride. Her ability to ride is tested by Zephyr, the less-than-cooperative alpha mare that Joannie will eventually buy, and a stark contrast to the gentle

ladies' horses of the nineteenth century. Joannie is a strong woman, both physically and mentally, and her sex in no way prevents her from mastering this horse, at least to the extent this willful horse can be mastered.

Joannie's allegiance to her sport, to jumping in particular, illustrates another difference between women of previous centuries, when women's fox-hunting was frowned upon as dangerously unladylike behavior. In the 1780s and 90s, the gender boundary that prevented women from jumping was crossed by Laetitia, Lady Lade, a "hard-riding, hunting, swearing kind of Englishwoman" whose riding feats and deviant behaviors were well-documented in the newspapers of the era (Landry 67). Yet as Landry points out, the publicized image of Lady Lade "and all the scandalous paraphernalia that made the Amazon character possible, represents that which must be marginalized, if not exterminated, from nineteenth-century femininity" (67). We see this attitude reflected in female characters of the time, including both George Eliot's Gwendolen Harleth, the heroine of *Daniel Deronda*, whose hunting and jumping is a marker of her nonconformity, shocking her traditionally moral family members, and, conversely, in Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of *Middlemarch*, who gives up riding, in spite of her love for the sport, because she feels it offers too much sensual and sexual pleasure. Joannie Edson marks a return to the model of Lady Lade; she is a hard-riding, jumping, swearing kind of woman, who would demand her right to this behavior as equal to any man's.

Again, in her riding, Joannie is more Rochester than Jane. This gender-bending, or perhaps gender-blending, gives rise to another aspect of Joannie's character: the question of what type of character she is. Both Emily and Charlotte Brontë were attracted to the Byronic hero. In fact, Emily's Heathcliff is so thoroughly Byronic that it is difficult to find a definition of the Byronic hero that does not include him as exemplar. Likewise, Charlotte's Rochester evidences

many of the characteristics of the Byronic hero: brooding, skeptical of social convention, arrogant, lacking respect for rank and privilege, self-destructive, and, at times, a loner. In creating Joannie Edson, I began to wonder whether the Byronic hero had a counterpart: the Byronic heroine? To that end, Joannie shares many of Rochester's Byronic propensities.

These characteristics, too, inspire her connection to a more modern Byronic hero, Clint Eastwood. In the midst of her crises, Joannie will ask, not what would Jesus do, but what would Clint do? They are simpatico because they share a world view—or, perhaps it would be better to say, a self view. She, like Rochester and so many of Clint Eastwood's legendary characters, will continually attempt to distance herself from her society, using scorn to help her justify her self-removal. And yet, like Rochester, she still finds herself oddly compelled to place herself in a social framework. Rochester accomplishes this by exploring European social circles or inviting a houseful of guests to Thornfield. Joannie will accomplish it by going on trail rides and going to restaurants with the novel's other characters.

Yet the presence of Jane as a part of Joannie's character will moderate some of her Rochesterian traits. In Brontë's novel, Jane Eyre first meets Edward Rochester when he falls from his horse, Mesrour, when it slips on the icy road. Rochester retells this event, casting Jane as a sprite who bewitches his horse, causing him to be unhorsed. Issues of both gender and class underlie this scene, and it will forecast the narrative arc of Jane and Rochester's story. He is brought down and made dependent on Jane, but the dependence is temporary. She will help to raise him back to his place, though his capacity for activity will be diminished. In this early scene, Rochester's rise is accomplished simply by Jane helping him into his saddle. In the larger narrative, she will find him recovering from the mad woman's fire, having lost property, an eye, and the use of his hand and remaining eye. She will marry him, ceding to him her

“independence,” the five thousand pounds she has inherited from her uncle, she will serve him while he recovers the sight of his eye, and she will give birth to a son whom, we are told, “inherited [Rochester’s] eyes, as they once were—large, brilliant, and black” (384-5). Though Jane insists on being treated as an equal, we see in both the horse scene and in the final chapter that she also functions to place Rochester above her after external factors, whether fire or ice, have leveled their relative positions.

Because Joannie Edson contains both Rochester and Jane, no character will unhorse her, and this crucial scene from Brontë’s novel does not appear in *Borrowed Horses*. Instead, the economic frustrations she faces as a not entirely independent woman—at least, not independent enough to afford a horse that would make her competitive with more wealthy riders—appear in her internal rants against the wealthy and in her own moment of madness, when she strikes Zephyr. It will be up to Joannie to negotiate a way through her lack of wealth and to an acceptable compromise, the purchase of a horse that she had initially dismissed.

Joannie’s story, like Jane and Rochester’s, is a love story, but it is less a story of finding human love than it is of finding an unexpected love for Zephyr. This love, for which Joannie must revise her romanticized image of the perfect horse, finally allows her to find an unexpected path to independence. Zephyr becomes the ultimate Byronic heroine and a good match for Joannie, in spite of the disapproving stares of their surrounding society, especially as vocalized by Dawn. Love becomes less about the object of love than the subject of love. By adjusting her riding goals and her image of equine perfection, Joannie changes parts of herself for Zephyr, but this change does not constitute a loss of self but an enlarging of her vision and understanding of herself.

Once Joannie realizes this, she must then decide if similar love is possible with Timothy or if that seedling love must be culled to allow space for her commitment to Zephyr. In Brontë's novel, love is always a power struggle, a search to find equilibrium between the genders. This power struggle still exists for Joannie, but her love for Zephyr offers a model for a possible alternative.

Timothy Llewellyn

I sympathize with Brontë's assessment of her own Polly Home, which I quoted earlier: "the weakest character in the book is the one I aimed at making the most beautiful." I have had similar feelings of frustration in creating Timothy Llewellyn, the novel's "hero," if this novel could be said to have a hero. Because I have abandoned old standards of hero- and heroine-like, I found myself, as I wrote, continually struggling with how to make him vivacious without being over-bearing, how to make him helpful without allowing him to "save" Joannie, how to make him masculine without making him a patriarch.

Early in drafting, I decided that Timothy was Coeur d'Alene Indian on his mother's side. I wanted to create a character who was as deeply connected to Idaho as Joannie feels herself to be, in spite of her desire for movement. Yet this decision has been a complicated one to work through. I found myself writing with Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Sherman Alexie's poem, "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel," central in my mind. In this poem, Alexie offers satiric advice, warning writers against all the stereotypes that have plagued depictions of Native Americans through written text. Since I cannot include the whole, I have excerpted several salient stanzas below:

All of the Indians must have tragic features: tragic noses, eyes, and arms.
Their hands and fingers must be tragic when they reach for tragic food.

The hero must be a half breed, half white and half Indian, preferably
from a horse culture. He should weep often and alone. That is mandatory. (lines
1-4)

...

Indian men are horses, smelling wild and gamey. When the Indian man
unbuttons his pants, the white woman should think of top soil. (21-22)

...

An Indian man can be hidden inside a white woman. An Indian woman
can be hidden inside a white man. In these rare instances,

everybody is a half breed struggling to learn more about his or her horse culture.

There is redemption, of course, and sins must be forgiven. (33-36)

...

In the Great American Indian novel, when it is finally written,
all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts. (39-
40)

How does one write about a culture that is not one's own? Should I veer radically from any hint
of cultural stereotypes—and, if I do, will Coeur d'Alene readers disown my character as being
too unlike members of their culture?

I have down-played Timothy's connection to the land, the original impulse that lead to his genealogy, as being too reminiscent of Iron Eyes Cody, the television image of Native American culture that I grew up with. It remains only in his name: "Timothy, like the grass," he points out, "not Tim." Rather than playing up stereotypical "Indian-ness," I made Timothy more typically a Northwesterner. His dialogue is laced with satire and irony, as is Joannie's, as is Alexie's poem. I did not allow him to complain about government cheese, even though (perhaps because) everyone I've ever known who grew up on a reservation talked about government cheese. I did not include the "enit?" that marks the American Indian dialogue written by Sherman Alexie. I did not want Timothy to sound in any way "typical."

But just as I did not want him to sound typical, nor did I want him to be rootless. I hesitated before giving him a former job at a casino, though the reservation casinos do offer some of the best job opportunities in the depressed economic environment of the reservation. I feared that this would seem too clichéd. Ultimately, I decided this was a risk worth taking because it allowed me to show his troubled relationship with the reservation and to give some background on what lead to his decision to leave the reservation. In other words, it allowed me to give Timothy some personality and depth.

The ending of the novel posed another set of difficulties. I knew that I did not want Joannie to be saved by a man, especially by a lover. Joannie's story must end on her terms, the result of her decisions (though with Dawn's guidance). Early on, I had planned on having her leave Timothy altogether and forge an independent life for herself. Yet as I wrote, I found that ending too simplistic. Because Joannie's story involves her attempts to find a place for herself within a social system despite her lack of femininity, it did not serve my story to write this solo ending. No, I wanted an ending that allowed my anomalous heroine to discover a social *place*.

Added to this, I did not want Timothy to “vanish,” as Indians tend to do at the end of novels and movies throughout American literature ranging from *The Last of the Mohicans* to *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. This trend, pointed out by critics from Leslie A. Fielder to Philip J. Deloria, figures Native Americans as a disappearing part of America, as being more relevant for our imaginings of them than as actual human beings. We see this concept at play in Alexie’s poem, in which novelists value Indians for their symbolic value as healers, as people who could lead whites on a dream quest or drum away doubts about masculinity. At the end of his poem, the fictive Indians are merely ghosts, despite their very real presence in American society. Timothy must be present in the novel as a character, not a caricature. He will not stand weeping over lost or damaged land; he will lead no one to visions. At the novel’s end, he will be present, recalled into Joannie’s life because of his value as a person, not as an idea.

The paternal half of Timothy’s ancestry he shares with me. Llewellyn, a welsh name, derives, like Griffiths, from the name of a Welsh warrior. He shares the name, too, with writer Richard Llewellyn, author of *How Green Was My Valley*. Like Native Americans in this country, the Welsh are a people who refuse to be totally conquered. Although their nation may have been subsumed into the British Empire, they retain a language and a national identity of their own. By giving Timothy a genealogical side in common with me, I hoped to give myself license to write him with a little more freedom. I will never have personal experience of what it is like to grow up a Coeur d’Alene Indian in the United States, but I do know what it is like to grow up as a Welsh/American, with an unpronounceable name that everyone assumes must be Irish (the more glamorous British Isles immigrants). I realize that may sound trite; obviously, Welsh/Americans are not a minority in the way that American Indians are. As a writer, though, I needed that small degree of common background to best create my character, even if it must

ultimately be outweighed by his maternal culture, since that is the culture through which he would be identified.

X-Ray Vision

As any reader of *Jane Eyre* well knows, Brontë devotes a great deal of attention to eyes and to the gaze. Jane is a watcher of people, constantly situating herself where she can watch and judge unobserved. Window seats are particular favorite spots, allowing Jane a space where she can be partially removed from the action of the room while still retaining a vantage point. Characters' faces are "read," their physiognomies assessed, to give insight into their inner workings. Along these lines, Rochester's loss of eye and eyesight at the novel's end reflects a crucial loss of power. In such a visual world, the loss of his hand is almost forgettable in comparison. Joannie will put similar value on the reading of the eye and on watching characters. She judges people by their eyes, just as horses' temperaments are judged by their eyes. In those windows, she seeks information about the other characters' innermost workings.

This desire to see the insides of people is also reflected in Joannie's career choice. As a radiographer, Joannie is allowed a view into the bones of people to which most of us do not have access. Thoughts of bones and of inner workings will extend far beyond her job, permeating the relationship she has to her own body and to those of her fellow characters. Unfortunately for Joannie, however, this unique vision into the insides of people does not reveal any crucial information. While Brontë's phrenological and physiognomical readings of characters are usually accurate, Joannie's ability to see the bones of people gives her no real information as to their thoughts and motivations.

Even so, Joannie feels her work as a radiographer to be a form of art. Just as Jane quietly values her paintings of her own imagined mental landscapes, Joannie sees her radiographs as a reflection of her identity, displaying her artistic ability to assess bodies so that she can take the best x-rays in the fewest tries. When Dr. Rivers questions her attention to this work, she bristles. Though she questions the value of her job in terms of her contributions towards saving lives (we see this in her conversation with Timothy in the coffee shop), the artistic elements of her work provide a sense of gratification. This artistic/creative side of Joannie provides a counterpoint to the physical skills we tend to associate with her character.

Idaho

Flannery O'Connor wrote that "to know one's self is to know one's region" (35). This holds just as true for characters as it does true for their writers. Joannie, despite her attempt to leave Idaho, is a part of the land that she grew up on. Anywhere else, she feels out of place, unable to understand her own identity in the context of new surroundings. As she puts it, in Idaho "I may not quite fit in [...] but at least I understand how I don't fit in, and the ways I don't fit in here make sense to me." She acknowledges that her goal, riding for the U.S. Equestrian Team, is odd for a girl from her home, and yet when she leaves to pursue her goal elsewhere, she loses her bearings altogether.

Her love of home, like her love of taking x-rays, is partially a visual love. As Joannie views her world and describes it, we sense her devotion to the land itself, not merely to the people who inhabit it. When she sees the yard sale in front of the old Victorian homes or the

pheasant exploding from the underbrush to spook her horse, her eye is making a type of love to her home.

Charles Baxter complained that too many writers use setting only as a way to reveal a character's emotional state. "A sad man sees sad trees. A murderous man gazes on a murderous lake." He continues,

This kind of one-to-one equivalency makes John Ruskin's ideas about the pathetic fallacy seem sensible all over again. If objects reveal only the characters who look upon them, they have nothing to tell us. All they would do is mirror us. [...] If a mountain exists only to express or reflect human feeling about it or anything else, it is diminished, so that humans can be its conquerors. (103)

It is my sincere hope that neither Joannie nor I have diminished any mountains. When Joannie talks about the Idaho wind, I want to evoke the same power as Brontë's descriptions of the wind around Thornfield. It is a wild thing, separate from Joannie and yet incorporated into her because she was formed by this place.

Joannie recognizes her horse Foxfire's deep physical connection to Idaho, the land whose grasses (its timothy, its alfalfa) fed and half-created him, yet she, too, shares this deep physical bond. She, too, has been raised on food grown by her mother in Idaho soil. Part of her desire not to leave home is bound in this connection. She feels that to transplant herself, to tear those roots, will exact a weakening.

One can't read *Jane Eyre* without noticing the wealth of elemental metaphors and connections. Even the names (Eyre/air, Mason, Poole, Rochester/rock, Rivers, etc) evoke earth, air, fire, and water. Joannie's connection to Idaho allows me room to bring these images into my own novel. No description of northern Idaho would be either accurate or complete without

descriptions of the dust, the dry wind, and the wheat fields. The characters, like the land, are elemental and passionate. Fire and ice are present in the eyes of the characters, most notably Dave's (though this has become a very tricky metaphor to work in without devolving into cliché). They radiate their heat; they feel it in their bones. To reverse Baxter's formula, I hope my characters are enriched by the land rather than the land being diminished by serving the characters.

Final Thoughts

It seems I could go on talking about my novel endlessly, but I am going to stop, even though there is more to say. In writing this, I wonder if I have imposed some limitations on my novel. Flannery O'Connor wrote, "a story [or novel] isn't any good unless it successfully resists paraphrase, unless it hangs on and expands in the mind" (108). My dearest wish is that my novel may do this for some readers, and the last thing I want to do is limit the directions in which it may be read through my own explication. Authorial intent is all well and good, but in the end, it was only "intent." What we intend by our words, as Joannie's experience illustrates, is not always what is conveyed. I have made an essay, an attempt, into novel writing. To return to metaphors of motherhood, I will now send my book forth, like Anne Bradstreet, worrying about the flaws the "ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain" (line 1) still contains, yet oddly happy that this child has been born, regardless of its defects. My grasp has assuredly fallen short of my reach, but I am glad to have risked the reaching.

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CHAPTER 1

IN THE CORNER

Bone and metals can be broken by repeated application of stresses that would be too small to break them if applied only once. This is the phenomenon of fatigue. [...] An athlete who runs 100 kilometers each week takes nearly two million running strides each year, stressing the tibia nearly two million times. Healing usually keeps pace with fatigue damage, but if it does not, failure or even complete fracture of the bone may result. Fatigue fractures are common in the tibia, fibula and metatarsals of athletes. They also cause problems in horses, sometimes making them collapse with a broken bone in the middle of a race.

- Alexander, R. McNeill, *The Human Machine*, p. 81

It was Eddie, my first trainer, who taught me about corners. The corner is where everything happens. “By the time you reach the fence,” he would say, “it’s too late.” I had to learn that the fence itself isn’t the obstacle. The obstacle is your mind. The trick was to convince yourself, all physical evidence to the contrary, that the fence was an illusion and that the jump was just another stride—taken with the same rhythm and tempo as the strides before it and the strides after. The rider keeps her eyes focused on the horizon beyond the fence and keeps her mind focused on the strides themselves, so that the horse, too, will forget that the obstacle is solid and looming and will allow himself to clear it cleanly in one magnificent thrust of haunches (“tempo, tempo”), and move on.

It is the corners that make this possible. In the corner, the rider must both urge and check the horse, asking him to condense and collect his power, to bring the hind feet further underneath himself, to coil like a tightly wrought spring. You can actually feel everything coming together—not just the body collecting but also the spirit; everything pulls in like water, like the tide preparing a wave. His forehand will lighten here, and gravity will lose its pull. Here, in the

corner, the laws of earthbound physicality could be temporarily stowed, and the jumping of an enormous and all too solid wooden fence becomes possible.

Eddie always put it more simply: “Bend the bow and let the arrow fly.” He repeated this phrase, like all the phrases that composed his lessons, so that now, years later, I still heard his voice, low and baritone, in my mind. Bend the bow, bend the bow. Let the arrow fly.

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There are so many things I would have done differently if I had known more.

I’m an x-ray tech; it’s my job to see inside of things, but I was so blind. I never saw what I needed to see. When I came back to Idaho that grim and bleary October, back from New Jersey where I’d spent two and a half years chasing a dream that didn’t work out, everything was smeared with the grey muck of early snow and dust. Home seemed only casually familiar, like the store-front setting of a film you’ve seen a million times but haven’t set foot in yourself. I had to walk in it a while, slog through the slush of it, to remember that I knew it at all. Some things had changed: what had been jewelry store on the corner Fourth now sold snow boards, the movie house on Main Street was a church. Mostly, everything was in its place. Except me: I couldn’t figure out where my place was anymore.

It couldn’t help that I wore guilt like a heavy coat. How I’d left everyone in Idaho without much of a backwards glance. How I’d ridden my horse in pain. If I’d known, if I’d seen the arthritis building in his legs, I wouldn’t have kept Foxfire jumping as long as I did. I hadn’t known until a few weeks ago, and he, faithful honest horse that he was, had never hinted. Now, after the radiosopes and nerve blocks confirmed the end of his career, all I knew was that I was that I needed a second horse, another jumper, and that there was no way I could earn the tens of thousands needed to buy such an animal with the salary I made as an x-ray tech—especially not

with the upkeep for Foxy, whom I wouldn't sell. I knew, or thought I knew, that Eddie had sold his horses the autumn before and moved to California where his wife had taken a teaching job. Mostly, I knew that I had failed, that New Jersey had eaten too much time and too much money, and that I was farther away from my goals than I ever had been.

This was my state of mind when I met Dave. I'd only been back a couple weeks and was still waiting for Foxy, who was being shipped and not due to arrive for days, when Dawn had called on her way home from work to see if I wanted to get a beer and catch up. In general, I'm not a big fan of bars: too stale, too noisy, too expensive, and way, way too close. But, so early on a Tuesday, Ladies Night or not, Yosemite Dick's would be fairly quiet.

The bar was located on the hazy border where town stopped and the outskirts of town began, so it never got the crowds of university kids the places on Main Street attracted. I don't know what was in that prefab box of a building before it became Yosemite Dick's, but it was clearly not built to be a bar. Night offered some camouflage, but not much. In daylight, it was an eyesore: peeling beige siding, small dark windows, and a gravel parking lot rutted with potholes, slushy brown from early snow flurries. It didn't even have a real sign, just a tattered banner hanging from the busted-out frame for the sign of whatever was here before. The way it hung, strung up from each corner, brought to mind an old cat grabbed by the scruff of its neck, paralyzed and unhappy.

Inside it wasn't much better. No attempt had been made to dress the place up. A plywood bar stretched the length of the wall nearest the door, and a scuffed jukebox glowed near one of the beams toward the center of the room. Laminate tables in varying shades of faded orange, and chairs whose ripped black vinyl had been, in most cases, repaired with duct tape, were widely spaced around the rest of the floor, the furniture placement less a matter of feng shui

and more a desperate attempt to make the large room feel less empty. The whole thing was a cheap, locals only sort of hang out, with the total lack of pretension that I, fresh from New Jersey, appreciated.

Dawn and I bought a pitcher of Bud and claimed a table in the middle of the room, ignoring the guy eyeballing us from the end of the bar. Dawn, who'd never been east of Montana, asked about New Jersey: what it was like, why I left. I told her that it was much prettier than I'd expected it to be. No toxic waste or broken down buildings. I'd been living where Hunterdon, Somerset, and Morris counties meet, in what they called the "Golden Triangle," a little over an hour west of the City: "New York," I translated for Dawn. For her, a westerner, the City might have been any city. The Golden Triangle was populated with names we only knew from labels: Johnson (& Johnson), Mars (/M and M). Steve Forbes owned a place across the road from the barn where I'd kept Foxy. I told Dawn how there were deer everywhere because they only allowed bow hunting, no rifles, and that I usually saw five or more deer every night in my short drive between the barn and the overpriced studio apartment I'd rented. Sometimes the deer grazed peacefully with the horses in the fields; sometimes, they lay broken and twisted on the side of the highway.

Dawn had hunted since she was ten years old—and she was good at it. I'd never seen her in her hunting gear, so I always imagined her hunting as I saw her now: her red hot Wranglers, her crisp stars and stripes blouse, her hair teased three inches high. It was impossible to envision her in camouflage, yet I knew she was an exceptional hunter—one who got her elk each year, then filled the tags of the friends who hadn't yet killed their own. The subject of deer got Dawn talking, letting me sit back and listen without having to answer more difficult questions about why I'd left and why I'd come back.

I looked around while she ranted about liberals, hunting controls, and overpopulation of prey animals. She was looking for a fight, I guessed—she knew my politics; she knew I normally loved our heated “discussions”—but I didn’t want to argue that night. Dawn’s diatribe mingled with the hum of the heater and the murmuring country music piped from the jukebox, and it seemed to lend the darkness of the bar a growling warmth, like that of a den sheltering its inhabitants from the chill wind outside and the smattering of snow that swirled on its currents.

The stringy-haired guy at the bar was still staring. From the tilt of his body, I guessed he was already well beyond the legal limit. He wore a suit and tie, but the cheap fabric of his jacket was crumpled, and the tie was a little too long and a little too shiny. An insurance agent, perhaps, or a car salesman.

Dawn finished her beer in a long, dramatic swig and clapped her glass on the table. “Well, I’m off. The Chevy’s in the shop, and I have to pick up Russ.”

That got my attention. “You’re not leaving me here?” I said, wondering if I should have taken the fight she was picking with her anti-liberal rant. And if she was going to stick me with a pitcher, why Bud? Why not Bass—or better still, Henry Weinhard’s, a microbrew I couldn’t get in New Jersey? “We’ve still got half a pitcher.”

“My present to you,” she said, chucking me on the arm.

I stared at her. “Fucker.”

“Damn straight.” Dawn smiled sweetly and slid into her damp wool coat. “See you at the barn.”

“Is this where I say ‘not if I see you first’?” I glowered as fiercely as I knew how.

“You watch too many Eastwood films,” she said, and made her way to the bar’s heavy door.

I settled back into my chair, contemplating the condensation on my glass and the maps it made as it wept. Dawn wasn't a minute out the door when bad suit man sidled up. "My friend and I've been talking," he slurred, pulling out the chair Dawn had just vacated; the press of her thighs still imprinted the seat, "and we've decided that you have the nicest hair in the whole place." He sat down.

I glanced back to the end of the bar where he'd been standing. Aside from a collection of empty bottles, it was decidedly bare. "Sir," I said, not sure yet whether to be angry or just sorry for this guy—annoyed nonetheless, "I hate to tell you this, but you've been alone since I got here."

He bowed his head and giggled hectically. "You caught me, you caught me. It was just me who was thinking that."

I stared at the guy for half a second, wondering what his story was and whether that pathetic come-on line had ever worked on anyone. Mainly, I felt bad for him, tragic as he was in his workday clothes, filling himself with watery beer. I imagined this was the highlight of his day, and realized uncomfortably that, until Dawn left, it'd been the highlight of my own.

I was just about to ask him to leave—not to hurt his feelings but just to explain that I didn't want company—when I felt a warmth at my back and knew someone had stepped up behind me, invasively close. "This guy bothering you?"

I didn't answer. I didn't even look at my would-be rescuer. I just grabbed up my jacket, my glass, and my pitcher, brushed past his green sweatshirt and worn-out jeans, and moved to an empty table in the corner under the exposed heating ducts. I didn't need a hero anymore than I needed the poor jerk in his cheap suit. Even without looking at him, I could sense this new guy's confidence. It radiated off him like heat.

The unmended foam of my new seat opened like a mouth, biting into the back of my thighs, my jeans insufficient protection. Irritations: I didn't want my day saved. I didn't want my chair pulled out or my door opened. I didn't want my hair stroked. I didn't want a warm hand caressing my cheek. I didn't want to explain—or, worse, apologize for—long hours at the hospital and long hours at the barn. I didn't want back rubs or neck rubs. I didn't want the bill picked up. I didn't want longing looks, or the needs those looks suggested.

What I wanted was a chair and a table in a dark, unbothered corner. No talk, just the distant mumbling of others and Johnny Cash in the jukebox. A place to be alone among strangers, where I could count the seconds between the disappearance and reappearance of the red bow tie of the neon "Miller Time" sign in the small, foggy window. One, two, three, cut out. One, two, three, light up. Dormancy; illumination; dormancy.

"Sorry about that guy." The man in the green sweatshirt pulled out a chair, but caught my eye and hesitated before sitting down. I drank a long slow sip of beer, easy as sighing, and gazed at him. He was an attractive guy, no doubt about it, and his confusion only made him more so. Confusion suited him. It complemented the lazy shag of his sun-blond hair. His eyes were the color of ice: the light grey of street slush here in the half light of the bar, but I imagined that in sunlight, they would pick up the color of the sky and appear blue, or at least bluish. They seemed honest, I thought, or at least, earnest, which perhaps isn't quite the same thing. Still, I liked the look of his eye. I liked the look of him in general. His sweatshirt and jeans were dull with saw dust, given shape by muscles made solid from work. "I'm sorry," he said. "You don't know me."

I shrugged and nodded him into the seat.

He sat uneasily, the ball so thoroughly in my court that he seemed at a loss as to what to say. Coldness had become habitual with me, a convenient way to avoid getting involved with anyone who might distract me from my riding. But at that moment, with Foxy out of commission, out of Idaho altogether for days to come, I realized I didn't have anything left to save myself for. And here was this man, a tall, muscled hero-type, standing there, as if sent for. I took pity on him in his confusion.

"I suppose I should say thank you," I said, but I kept my voice dull and listless.

"No," he said. "I see now that you're a girl who can take care of herself. I butted in. I'm the one who should be sorry."

I smiled a smile that was more than half smirk. "You were trying to be nice."

"No," he ducked his head slightly and grinned, as if suddenly embarrassed. "No, the truth is, I'm new here, and when I saw that guy go over to bother you, I thought, here's a chance for me to meet someone."

"Ahh. So your chivalry was selfishly motivated."

Something in my phrasing got his attention. He looked up at me with new eyes, smiling broadly and confidently. "Totally selfish, I'm afraid."

"Well," I said. "It appears to have worked. Or, at least, I won't pull my shot gun on you just yet."

"Phew," he said, still smiling. He ran his hands over his thighs, the denim underneath faded and dirty. A series of small holes lined the seam of his inner thigh, none quite big enough to reveal the skin underneath, but they made him seem vulnerable somehow.

I smiled back at him, a warmer smile this time. "Where did you move from?"

"The South."

“But you have no Southern accent?”

“Nah,” he said, paused, smiled again: “we don’t do those anymore. Southern accents are so passé.”

“I see.” I paused and tried to think of something witty to say in return, but nothing came to mind. “The warm South, eh? You must be loving this fine weather we’re having.”

“It’s a real ‘welcome to Idaho.’” His eyes crinkled at the corner, so even when he didn’t smile, his face still reflected amusement. I often judge by the look of an eye—it’s how to judge horses, but I find it generally applicable. The expression of his eyes was open and friendly. Inviting. I felt the tension relaxing in my shoulders.

“Typical of the welcomes we give, I’m afraid. A little on the cold side. Tough to take if you’re strange to it.”

“But not so bad, right? I mean, it’s cold, but not bitter.”

“No, not bitter.”

Even in this darkness, his smile held some sun. It was the type of smile that made you smile back, and I felt myself sliding into it, wanting to make him smile more, wanting him. I took another sip of beer. What was I doing?

He sat back in his chair and looked at me. “I’m Dave, by the way,” he said.

“Joannie,” I replied. “Joannie Edson.”

I knew as I said my name that I was committing to something, or that I was committing to trying something. I never had seen myself in this position: the girl meeting men at the bar. That wasn’t me, or, it wasn’t the me I’d known myself to be. But Foxy wasn’t here and there were no more dreams to ride for, even when he arrived. And then appears a man, new in town—what were the odds of meeting someone who’d just moved to Idaho when I had only just moved

back? It seemed like an opportunity: a way to find my place back in town as he found his own place. The softness of the jersey sweatshirt itself seemed to hold comfort. At least, it seemed worth a try.

*

When I left Idaho, I had said that I went to New Jersey so I could train with the legendary Jack Stuart Flaherty, *chef d'equipe* of the US Team (which I did), but really (this is the embarrassing part) I went out there because I wanted him to notice me and decide I had extraordinary talent (which, happily, he did).

The problem? He later noticed that my horse was getting old, that he would not be capable of jumping much longer, that he probably shouldn't be jumping now. He told me I needed a new horse, a young one, a talented one, preferably European bred, to continue in this sport—a horse that would cost, he ball-parked, somewhere between \$100,000 and \$250,000. Minimum. He told me this in a meeting on the second of October, our last lesson before he and his barnful of horses and riders were due to leave for Florida and the winter show circuit.

I was packing for Idaho by the end of the following week, the radiographs in hand that proved Jack Stuart right. I can't read horse bones as well as I can read human, but even I could tell that things weren't ok. The joints glowed too white; their luminous density confirmed the foreboding. Arthritis in the hocks and navicular up front, a double whammy. That was that. Foxy would not jump again.

I had always said I that I would do anything to ride for U.S. Equestrian Team. Back in college, it was the nagging, back-of-the-mind voice that got me out to the barn on those January Saturdays when there was a fire in the fireplace and TNT's all-Eastwood weekend on the TV. My three roommates would be snuggled on the sofa, popcorn in the middle lap, cocoa in each

hand, and off by the single-pane window of that dreadful, drafty old Victorian would be me, just back from working the 5AM-1PM biscuit shift at Hardee's and now changed into my old ski jacket (snowing its filling from the worn elbows I never had time to patch), long johns, fleece breeches, and hand-me-down chaps, trying to convince myself that it really wasn't that cold out. I told myself that this is what riders—real riders—do. They go out, even when it isn't fun.

It's the mantra that goes right back to the Pony Express. In wind and sleet and driving rain, come hell or high water, you throw the saddle on and do your work. Most days, even in January, I enjoyed it, but many days you go because of something deeper, the wish that dare not admit itself. I imagined people scoffing if they knew why I was really going—because, let's face it, girls from small towns in Idaho don't ride for the Team. I imagined those people laughing at me, the silly girl with foolish hopes, and I wanted them to eat that laughter. I wanted to be the one force-feeding it back to them, as they gagged and spit.

And now? I couldn't afford a second horse, and I wouldn't get rid of Foxfire. Worse, I knew that it was me that was keeping me back, circling in the corner, because back in New Jersey, Jack had given me my option: "Not enough money?" he had said. "You're young. You're attractive. Why don't you get married?" As if it were that simple, like a damned Jane Austen novel or something. I must have smiled, because he said, "I'm serious." I had no doubt he was; everything in his stony face, his even tone, said it. I'd known people there—a few, plenty—whose husbands were tolerated only for their bank balance. At least, those were the rumors that floated around the barns, but until that moment, I never really thought about what that meant. Mercenary marriages, alive and well.

I had always said I would do anything for my sport, but here was the line I wouldn't cross. Could, but would not. The obstacle: me.

Even then, I had to wonder what Mr. Jack Stuart Flaherty would have done to make that marriage of convenience happen. If I'd said, "yeah, ok, good idea," what would the next step have been? Did he have a catalogue of such willing bachelors, the ones with money enough to buy themselves a trophy-winning show-jumping bride? Would I have been owned, like Man O' War or Secretariat? A prize to show off to fellow CEOs? Would my hubby have been an old man, rich Uncle Pennybags, or did young guys do this, too? Would he have been kindly or resentful? Jealous or indifferent? What had stopped me? Principles? Ignorance? Fear? What if I'd done it? Would I own a stable-full now? Would I be training for the next Grand Prix instead of circling here, in my dusty Idaho corner, directionless?

*

I didn't stay long in the bar that night. Just long enough to finish my part of the pitcher and give Dave my phone number. It felt so weird, doing that. Like I was just some normal girl in some average bar. *This is how people live*, I had told myself. *This is what people do every day*. But not me. And still, I found myself wandering around my apartment the next morning, half-heartedly pulling things out of their boxes, thinking about those broad, powerful shoulders, wondering when—if—he was going to call. Not until late that evening, as it turned out. Nine o'clock. His voice sounded tired, but still, it was his voice (my silent little boogie: *I am irresistible*—all sirens have a victory dance), and the next night, we would have dinner in the sublet apartment that the company had rented for him, his pad until he closed on his new house.

The following morning, I went running. I left the house thinking of him: I am going to have dinner with hot guy Dave. The muscles of my legs felt muddy and out of sync: too many days in the truck, driving cross country, too much inactivity. Yesterday morning's weight lifting wasn't helping. I'd overdone legs, and the muscles tensed as I strode forward, tightening right

when I needed them to uncoil. I felt sloppy as I moved down the road, more like a hippo lumbering along than a gazelle. My thoughts shifted to Foxfire waiting in New Jersey, wondering where I was and why I didn't come to him. The days were empty and weird without that daily ride. I pictured him looking out over the pasture gate, searching the roads for my truck. I wondered if he was eating well, despite the upset of routine. I wondered if he missed me.

But when I got home, my mind had again circled back to Dave. I used shower gel instead of soap so I could smell girly and pretty. I put on lotion. I rubbed it into my legs wondering if he'd be touching those legs tonight, wondering whether we'd end up making out on his sofa, like the girls in movies and on television always seemed to end up on their first dates.

After I showered and picked out an outfit for the evening, I had nothing to do for the rest of the day but unpack and wait to see Dave. I looked around at the bare beige walls of my apartment and wondered if this was what life would be like until I could find another horse to ride. I tried to tell myself it could be enough.

*

Dave greeted me at the door with a quick kiss on my wind-chilled cheek, took my jacket, and guided me, his warm hand on the small of my back, into his place. His small ways of touching were reassuring rather than intrusive. A way of coming into my space without quite invading it. Showing a respect. He asked if I was strictly a Budweiser girl or if I wanted something else, and I asked for my options. He opened the fridge: white zin or chardonnay—a cheap one. I didn't cringe, though the muscles of my face may have twitched a little. (What kind of girlie girl did he think I was?) I opted for the chardonnay, and he poured a liberal dose into a highball glass; the wineglasses, he explained, were sitting on a truck, probably somewhere

outside Oklahoma. I smiled and wondered if this man, so obviously not a wine drinker, even owned wine glasses.

Dave had laid out some CDs and asked me to choose one for the stucco-spattered boom box on the floor in the corner of the dining room. Odd CDs: a burned copy of Harry Connick, Jr., a bargain bin collection of piano sonatas, a jazz mix that appeared to have been bought at a Starbucks. I wondered where he stashed the rest of his CD collection and why he picked these for tonight, for me. There must have been more somewhere.

I didn't ask. Instead, while he arranged things in the kitchen, I roamed around the living room, looking at the few possessions he'd brought with him, the things that would tide him over until the moving truck arrived with his stuff. A dog-eared copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* lay on the end table, a bookmark near the end. I picked it up and turned it over. I'd read the book as a freshman in high school—an abridged version, much thinner than this one. It was one of two novels I remembered reading. Mainly, we watched movie versions of novels: a black and white *Great Expectations*, a 1960s *Romeo and Juliet*. The other novel, *The Killer Angels*, we read as juniors. My best friend Jennifer's honors English class had read *The Scarlet Letter*, which sounded far more interesting to me than the civil war novel. I'd asked my teacher why we were reading *The Killer Angels* as early American lit when it had only been written in the 1980s. He'd told me it was to "promote life-long reading." Now, I couldn't remember the last novel I'd read.

Dave poked his head in and saw me flipping through *The Count*, caught me reading his marginal notes. "Have you read that?" he asked.

"Not since high school." I didn't tell him we'd read the short version.

"What did you think?"

From the look on his face, I could tell there was a right answer to this question. He was looking for something sharp, insightful, I thought. “To tell you the truth, I don’t remember much about it.”

“You should read it again,” he said.

“It looks like you’ve read this one a few times.” The cover was so creased it nearly fell off in my hand.

“Yeah, well.” Dave looked momentarily thoughtful, like he wasn’t sure how much he wanted to divulge. He smiled. “It’s my favorite book. I read it every year or so. Such a great story: action, revenge.” His hair hung over his eyes a little and he said no more about it, but his eyes were ablaze: the eyes of a man speaking about his passion.

I had thought Dave was attractive in the light of the bar, but he was better in this light. His skin was warm from sunlit days working on construction sites where he served as foreman. The company, he told me, was his father’s, and he worried that some of the men resented him sometimes for rising so quickly in the business. He hadn’t really bothered with apprenticing, he explained. After a small embezzlement scandal with the previous foreman, his father was anxious to put someone whom he could trust in charge, and Dave dropped out of college to take the job. There seemed to be a trace of regret when he mentioned dropping out, but he swallowed it and moved on quickly. He talked about the mistakes he’d made at first, and how much he’d learned over the last several years, “not just about two by fours and rivets,” he said, smiling again, “but about people and how to keep them happy. How to listen at the right time, you know?”

I’d never thought about construction foremen needing people skills, how they were like the doctors I worked with in that way, needing a good bedside manner, needing to be able to

break bad news in such a way that the man wouldn't blame the bearer of the news. And I thought about how Dr. Rivers in E.R., for one, would resent that comparison, "as if a college drop out needed anything like the skill," I imagined him saying, his resonant voice giving anything he said authority. He liked to remind me of rank and education. Me, the lowly X-ray tech (*tech*, he'd say, not radiographer), who only had a few years at Lewis-Clark State and a certificate.

I didn't tell Dave about the hospital, not about Dr. Rivers or his implied sneers about my return home. I wouldn't start up at the hospital again for nearly two more weeks. Instead, I listened to him talk, the vibrations of his deep voice. There was some accent there after all, I decided, but it was covered over. I wondered if college had done that to him, like some of the farm kids in Idaho toned down their accents when they moved to Moscow.

It hadn't surprised me that he'd gone to college. His eyes had a calm sort of intelligence in them; his gaze was level and steady. I wondered if he was happy with his decision to quit school for his father, but I didn't ask. It was too early for that conversation, and I didn't want to look intrusive. Nor did I tell Dave much about myself. Nothing more personal than my long-standing love for Clint Eastwood, a jazz fan I noted, nodding to the CD player where the Starbucks jazz spun, and who, in fact, I saw at the Idaho's Lionel Hampton Jazz Fest years back—a glimpse of the profile: the sun-damaged cheek, the corner of his eye, his whitened temple. I'd like to say it was respect for his privacy that kept me from getting any closer, but in truth, I was afraid. I couldn't see Clint unsilvered, unscreened. I walked away.

Dave served a roast chicken, peas, and wild rice. "Wow, this looks fantastic," I said.

He blushed a little, the warm skin of his cheeks glowing. "It was nothing."

I ate a bite. "It's delicious," I said.

The chicken didn't fool me for a second. Over the years, I had bought enough rotisserie chicken at Rosauers to know it when I saw it: a small bird perfectly cooked on all sides, lacking the browned top of an oven-roasted bird. The coating gave it a funny aftertaste that permeated through the skin and into the meat itself. He'd opted for the lemon pepper over the barbecue, teriyaki, or herbed. The rice was, undoubtedly, Uncle Bens and the peas were slightly overcooked and swimming in artificial butter sauce. I determined to be polite.

My "wine glass" never went below half-full before he'd refill it. I couldn't decide if he was just being overly polite or whether he was trying to get me drunk. And so what if he was, I thought. What the hell? I felt I was due a little drunkenness, a little irresponsibility, after the months of hard training and sacrifice that had all gone to naught. I wanted the physical pleasure. I wanted not to have to think about it. I wanted not to have to think at all: about Foxy, about New Jersey, about the fences we would never jump.

Dave switched quietly to Budweiser after his first glass of wine. I considered teasing him, as I would have teased anyone I knew (grapes too strong for him? wine too classy?), but I held my tongue. He didn't know me that well yet, I reminded myself, and I didn't want to offend him with sarcastic "wit." I stayed on my best behavior, chatting superficially, playing the lady right up to the final kiss at the door.

*

I have owned two vehicles in my life, my first car and the battered Chevy pick-up I drive now. I got my first car when I was fourteen and had just learned to drive, back when rural kids could still get daylight driving permits and use them off the farm. My parents, living way out on the other side of Moscow Mountain, were sick of driving me in to the school bus stop and the barn, and decided I should be responsible for getting myself to and from school and riding

lessons. They helped me buy a small, bullet-shaped two-seater, the blue paint long ago dulled to an ashy silver. I called it “the Pod.” My friends (always a small group) and I decided that it could serve as a sort of litmus test for potential dates, sort of like the sword and the stone in reverse: the man who could fit in the Pod would be the man of my dreams. It had become so old and so long-standing a joke, that I thought of it whenever I met a new man. I wondered now whether Dave would be the mythical man whose body would magically fold up comfortably in the torn vinyl of those small old bucket seats.

I think, even so early on, I doubted it. I imagined my best friend Jennifer from high school scrutinizing him the way she did all the guys I never ended up dating. “Hmm,” she’d say. “Cute, but a little long in the legs,” (a little frown and shake of her head), “no, I just don’t think this one will quite fit into your life.” I shook the thought out of my head. The pod was long gone, and Jennifer gone too; my world now had nothing if not space to fill—emptiness. I decided that I could no longer operate my life by the old rules. Dave would stay.

*

The day after our dinner, I had planned to visit my parents, but snow started to fall and I hesitated. When Dave called to say that he was getting off early, no later than three in the afternoon, I decided I’d put my visit home off a day rather than risk unplowed roads, even though my truck had four wheel drive and I didn’t think it was yet snowing hard enough.

My place, then:

The boxes I’d moved in my horse trailer were still only half-unpacked, and my furniture at a minimum, my double bed with its Hollywood frame (easy to fold up and move), a citrus-orange easy chair with fantastic art deco architecture, my treadmill, and two old dressers that I’d found at auction when I got my first apartment and had always liked too much to part with (one,

a plain cherry wood with deep drawers, in the bedroom; the other, a 1960's mod-style white enamel, in the living room with my TV and VCR stacked on top). It was a sad assortment, I suppose, for someone just past twenty-six years old, but I didn't need or want anything more. I sold my old couch when I moved to New Jersey, and hadn't bothered to replace it. I rarely had company, and sofas took too much space in a horse trailer stacked with boxes, two dressers, an easy chair, a treadmill, and a bed. Foxy, himself, I'd had professionally shipped both ways, the slow starts and stops of the semi-truck and commercial air-ride trailer easier on his joints, an expense well worth the cost, and one that saved me from hiring a moving van. With the dividers removed and the floorboards hosed and scrubbed, the horse trailer we'd used for shows and trail-rides made a great space for cargo.

In place of a couch, I stacked a pile of folded quilts on the floor. Foxfire, due to be picked up in New Jersey that morning, was still three days journey away. The only thing I had of him then was the box in the corner. In it, a tangle of ribbons (mostly blues and reds, a handful of yellows, whites, pinks, and greens), a silver-plated tray, an assortment of tarnishing cups and bowls. Looking at it then, I already knew that someday, they would be all that was left. His saddle, his bridle would dress some other, unimaginable horse. Some inferior horse, I thought, because even if he could jump higher, longer, faster, he wouldn't be Foxy. The weight and shape of his hoof in my hand as I picked out stones, the curve of his back against my thigh and butt, his body's slope, its rhythm—everything different and wrong because it was different.

In days, Foxy would be home, in the pastures he grew up in, the grasses that fed him, that made him. Each blade he'd consumed had become muscle and bone. And someday those grasses that would ask for him back, a body to fertilize tender shoots, and all I'd have is this box

of ribbons, of tray and bowls, of cups, everything dulling in some attic corner where I wouldn't be able to forget it.

I didn't tell Dave this when he came; he was smiling too brightly. Instead, I smiled too and dug Parcheesi (me, the master of the blockade) out of the only box labeled "Living Room."

*

MY ROUTINE. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I ran. Some days, I would run mid-length distances at a steady pace, often seeking out hills (not difficult to find in the rolling landscape of northern Idaho) and usually hitting 6th Street hill (my steepest climb) some time in the middle of my jog. Other days, I would do interval training—sprints, running hard and fast for short intervals, measured in mailboxes, then slow to a jog for several more mailboxes while I gasped and caught my breath before starting my next sprint. For this, I would find the flattest roads I could find, a much more difficult mapping. On Saturday or Sunday, I ran longer, testing my endurance with six or more miles.

Tuesdays, and Thursdays, I headed to the gym, a fluorescent-lit basement beneath one of the Main Street bars. The walls were mirrored like some narcissist dream. There, I worked through the routines of free weights and machines that I had paid a trainer to design for me years ago.

When I first started working out, it would have been difficult to say which of these activities I hated most. "No rest for the wicked," Eddie used to say, and I held that in mind, repeating it, at first, like a mantra to push each step forward or to pull each heavy rep. One of the draws of riding when I began was that it didn't necessarily involve a lot of running or weight lifting, but when I got serious about riding, I got serious about training. Running, at least, had the benefit of being an outdoor exercise, until slush and snow gave way to ice, and I had to turn

on the treadmill. Over the past few years, I had starting to enjoy running: the solitude and thought. Mainly, though, I liked the feeling of being done, of having the fortitude and determination to do something I hated.

There was also comfort in routine. It was like the satisfaction of seeing a movie I'd already seen five times, knowing where the good parts were, not having any surprises. That was another unforeseen difficulty when I moved away. My years' long routine, not changed in any obvious sense, felt foreign: the bar on the bench press farther back, the padding on the hamstring curl thicker, or the neighborhoods of clustered houses—mailslots in the doors rather than mailboxes. I measured by telephone poles instead. I found new routes. I tried to make it familiar. Still, two and a half years later, back again in the middle of that dreary October, when I ran and breathed the old dry air, felt its burn in my lungs as I sprinted, I realized my disorientation had never gone away. There was only one home.

*

Dave had stayed after Parcheesi that night. He'd gotten progressively closer until his breath mixed with mine, until we found ourselves kissing. I couldn't say who'd made the first move. He ran his hand over my thighs as I'd envisioned him doing the night before. Only, I hadn't been prepared this time: the day-old shave prickly under his hot, strong hand. He didn't seem to notice. His eyes looked at me only half-focused, and I realized that none of it mattered. He didn't want the lotions or perfumes; he wanted me, my body. I relaxed into his touch.

In the morning, when he saw me putting on my running tights for the workout I planned to do after he left, he offered to join me. I looked at him: buttoning up his shirt, standing in untied work boots. "Wearing that?" I said.

He smiled. "I could go get a change of clothes."

“Won’t you be late?”

He shrugged. “Maybe a little.”

I shook my head. “Oh no. I’m not going to be responsible for that.”

Again, that easy smile crossed his lips. “OK, but we’ll do a rain check. This weekend, maybe?”

Something in my stomach turned. I didn’t run with other people, but I didn’t know how to turn him down. “Are you a runner?” I asked.

“Used to be,” he said. “I played ball in high school, ran for that.” He tucked the shirt into his unbuttoned jeans. “It’s been a while, but I don’t think I’m totally out of shape yet.”

My mind was rebelling against the whole idea, the break from the routine. I felt panicked. I felt trapped. I willed my nerves calm, reminding myself how silly I was being. Here was a man, a beautiful man, who wanted to go running with me. We could have a conversation. We could talk about things and get to know each other better. What was wrong with that? (*Everything, everything.*) I admitted none of this. I walked over and kissed him. “How about Sunday, then?” I said. He kissed me back in reply.

I made scrambled eggs before Dave left for work. He stood behind me as I turned the eggs. He kissed my neck and enfolded me in flannelled arms, his shirt infused with the warm smell of sawed wood. Again, I felt myself sliding into him, against him. Romance. Passion. I could get used to this, I thought.

Later, Dave gone, my morning run over, I locked the hubs on my truck and set out for Moscow Mountain. The snow hadn’t stuck in town, but the Mountain was white, and though I would only skirt along the roads around its base, there was no way to know how low the snow fell.

Mom and Dad were both retired now, Mom from the Co-op and Dad from the law: old hippies finally at home in their self-created utopia. They had never believed in so many things—things that other, normal people wouldn't question: shoes in the summer, compassionate conservatism, Wal-Mart. They *did* believe, had always believed, and would always believe in one holy and Catholic apostolic church for the forgiveness of sins, and they attended mass every Sunday.

I had lapsed in so many ways, not only from their church but from their ideals. Not that I had totally gone in for capitalistic materialism—not that I believed, as W put it, that “America must shop”—but I was sullied nonetheless. I owned more than I needed, I wanted more still (that ideal horse), and whenever I went home, I felt the weight of my guilty desires, of my last trip to the mall, of my closet full of boots and running shoes, of my drawers full of Eastwood tapes and DVDs, and I became oddly conscious that it had been a long, long time since my last confession.

The fact that my parents never reminded me of this guilt, never preached or even suggested, did not make me less aware. Their pride in me and their confidence in my ability to make good decisions always baffled me.

I walked into their house, unannounced as usual, without bothering to knock because they always seemed to expect me, no matter how long it'd been. “If you're staying for lunch,” my father called from somewhere in the kitchen, “you'd better say so now so we can put more potatoes on.”

“Lunch sounds good.” I went and stood in the kitchen doorway and watched my parents bustle from drawer to sink to butcher block, getting in each other's way. They looked more alike each time I saw them, as if they were continually changing into duplicates of the same person,

the long straight waist, the slightly stooping shoulders, accentuated now as they leaned to slice the vegetables. Their hair: frazzled and pony-tailed, hair so ubiquitous at the co-op that I'd started to wonder whether it was something in the sesame seeds or quinoa. Their hair, the earthy smell of the wood-paneled kitchen, the sight of Pilate curled up on his dog bed in the corner: everything comforted. Love, I reminded myself. This is love.

*

A little background on my parents: My father did not used to wear shoes. Ever. A So-Cal kid who stayed in Los Angeles through his law degree, he'd always envisioned them as an unnecessary shackle, a signifier of materialism and the hyper-socialization of Westernized humanity. To understand our world, he thought, we must feel our world, touch its changes, its dust and mud, our litter, the new grass, everything, with our soles. He'd "understood" the world this way for so long that now his feet were calloused against pebbles and thorns, and shaded by dirt so embedded into the skin that it would no longer wash out.

He met my mother at UCLA, where she had gone to escape her parents' rigid conservatism. My maternal grandparents still live somewhere in southern Idaho. My mother has never told me where. She can't honor a mother and father, she says, who don't honor life, all colors of life. She never told me that they're racists—she always avoided speaking of them in general—but I imagine they are from this comment. Not just talking racists but acting racists, the type with club memberships, the type Idaho was working to rid itself of. Perhaps I am wrong. There is much I will never know about my mother.

One thing I do know is that she loved Idaho. After four years of ever-changing majors and a year of dating my father, she left school and molded a life that would include all her loves: God, gardening, my father, Idaho. And eventually, me, her child. I don't know how my father

felt about moving to Idaho at the time. It couldn't have been an easy adjustment, and Idahoans, even in Moscow, have never much cared for their Californian immigrants. But now, when he sits on the deck and looks over the garden that he and my mother have planted, harvested, and planted again for nearly thirty years, he seems at peace.

Of course, he couldn't go shoeless year round here—not if he wanted to keep his toes. He bought a pair of heavy duty Sorrels, thickly lined, for winter weather. The pair in the closet must've been fifteen years old. There had been another pair before them, worn until they were worn through. I believe these were the only shoes my father owned in his adult life. Two pair of boots: concessions.

People sometimes asked him why, what did he have against footwear? My father, always the attorney, would return a cross-examination of why-nots that left most people scratching their heads, wondering, I imagine, whether they too should unburden their feet. I loved watching my Dad in action, even if he never converted anyone to bare-footedness. I've never asked him about it, but I imagine he could have made a fortune in some California firm, even shoeless. Maybe especially shoeless, since that was part of how he worked: lulling people into over-confidence with his rumpled suit, his shaggy hair, his apparent daffiness. People always underestimated him, revealed too much, and then my father, scratching his head, apparently confused, would catalogue the ways the witness contradicted himself. I loved how, even making his panther pounce, he looked so much like an absent-minded professor.

I think he could have made partner down there, but I don't think he would have been happy. My mother offered him a different vision of success.

She's tough, my mother: not aggressive, but unyielding. I would bet that she would have moved to Moscow whether my father had come with her or not, even with no job to go to and a

dozen other weighty unknowns. Or maybe this is just the story I constructed for them, based more on the parents I know now than the kids they were then: a law school grad and a college dropout, just figuring out how to live, deciding when to trust love enough to give up one possible life for another option.

*

Lunchtime. The view from their window: Snow-covered hillside. Wild wheat poking through the white. Movement.

Moose have the same long, gangly legs as horses. Different feet, a straighter shoulder, but the same legs. Yet, unlike horses, they never seem to be in a hurry. In all the years I've lived in Idaho, of all the moose I've seen (usually between three and five a year during winter foraging), I've never seen a moose run. Once and only once, I saw one trot: a slow, leggy trot across highway 95 and through open wheat fields, towards the pine forest on the fringe. Mostly, I've seen moose as I saw these two, a mother and her adolescent calf, meandering through my parents' shrubbery, devastating it with their methodical chewing.

My mother, father, and I watched them from the dining room table, where we also were eating. My mother's jaw was tense as she chewed. Some bushes wouldn't survive the moose's relentless grazing. On the other side of the table, my father only chuckled, eyes wonderstruck.

The pair of moose pulled mouthfuls of branch, exposing its green-white center, its pulpy splinters. They chewed deliberately.

"You know," I said, "I bet if I opened the door and slammed it, they'd move along."

"Don't you dare," my father turned on me with a quickness that has long since stopped surprising me.

"I was just thinking of Mom's plants."

It was my mother who spoke now, looking down at the table and straightening her napkin, pushing its creases flat. “I know, Joannie, but let them eat. With winter so early this year, they’ll need every bite.” Even as she spoke, the tension along her jaw hardened. She was talking to convince herself as much as to convince me.

The calf pulled at the branches of the hawthorn, though most of the leaves had already fallen. It was a tree of spikes now; its two-inch thorns lining each branch.

“They’re not your mother’s plants anyway,” my father said. His eyes, distant again, seemed to look not only through the window but through the moose themselves. “We’re on their land, squatters, and what we plant here is theirs as much as ours. If they want to eat them, well, that’s our tax, our user’s fee.” It was my Dad’s old argument, the one that made the guys at the garden center roll their eyes, one of the few unconvincing arguments I heard him make, yet he repeated it, believing it utterly. He thought that anything that can eke a living on this hill has its right to, and defended the squirrels that ravaged their bird feeders with the same fervor as these more majestic nuisances.

“OK, wacko,” was all I said now, smiling at him.

My father smiled back, benevolence in every crinkle of his hooded eyes.

I thought about his old argument again later when I was back home, in my Moscow apartment, and Dave had invited himself over. The roses he bought were blooming on my borrowed card table, each petal’s edge delicately curling, each petal’s velvet red as blood. They were flawless flowers, ridiculously out of season. I squeezed each bud gently, and each yielded, indicating that they would open perfectly in the next few days—perfectly but scentlessly, as most things hot-house grown.

Dave paid his dues for invading my space with these flowers and Chinese take-out, back rubs and kisses.

Each person's kiss is uniquely their own, as identifying as a fingerprint. Dave's were insistent: pressure and tongue. There was something desperate in his kiss. Our time together felt like just that: time. As if there was a clock ticking somewhere in the background, as if we needed to make the most of each minute, to fill each night with passion, knowing that in the morning, we would return to our normal lives. In the dark together, we could be something else: animal and intimate.

Sunday morning, we pulled on our running gear. His shoes were old and muddy. Mine: still white though slush-spattered. I reserved my running shoes only for running, until each pair's five-hundred miles were up and I replaced them with a new pair, down-grading the old for daily wear at the hospital. Dave's shoes looked shot—not totally collapsed under the heel but lacking in the cushion that would save his knees and feet from injury. I wondered how much thought he'd given to his arches, to the way his foot hit the ground, the way he traveled in his bones.

I said nothing. I avoided looking at or thinking about his shoes, but I couldn't quite shake my uneasiness: this wasn't going to work. He jumped on the balls of his feet a few times, smiled at me, and began to stretch. I never stretched at the beginning of workouts. I walked the first quarter mile, then broke into a slow jog while the muscles continued to warm up. I saved stretching for when I got home, when the muscles were already as warm as they could be. I'd never seen any hard evidence that stretching prevents injury, and stretching like this, muscles cold from inactivity, is more likely to pull something than not.

Again, I said nothing. Instead, I stretched, too, gingerly, carefully, so as not to hurt myself before the run.

“I feel outstanding,” Dave said. “I’m pumped, baby.”

“Yeah,” I said.

He threw an arm around my waist and lifted me, spinning me around him. “This is great,” he said. “I haven’t done this in years, but I don’t know why I ever stopped.”

I laughed. “Easy, Tiger. We haven’t even hit the road, yet.”

“Well, come on, slow mo. I’ll race you to the first mailbox.” He spun and took off, and I darted out, laughing and calling after him: “false start, you cheater.”

For the first half mile or so, Dave ran fine. In fact, at first he seemed to be checking his pace, slowing himself down so that I could keep up, and I began to think that my earlier fears had been misplaced. Sure, he hadn’t run in a while, but he was clearly an athlete, and the physical work he did each day must have kept him in shape. But by the end of that first mile, he’d stopped all talking. The smile was gone from his face, replaced by a solemn determination.

Midway into the second mile, his legs began to flail a little more instead of striding out with the easy pace with which he’d started. I slowed my pace for him now. His face was an unnatural red, the sweat running into his eyes causing him to squint and blink. I wasn’t sweating yet. He breathed through his mouth, and the sound of his breath seemed to have a little bit of a wheeze to it. I slowed to a walk.

“That’s all you got?” he panted.

I shook my head. “You’re going to hurt yourself if we go any further.”

He bent over, hands on knees. “I’m fine,” he said, between gulped breaths.

I looked at him there, so pitiful. Doing this because he wanted to impress me, or because he valued our time together so much he didn't want to lose an hour to my run. It was endearing, that devotion. And yet, weekends were always my distance runs. I still had a few miles to go before turning back. Somehow, I had to convince Dave to go back to my apartment before he hurt himself. My shoulders fell a little: he wouldn't go back alone. I knew it as surely as I'd ever known anything. He wouldn't admit defeat like that. The best I could do was to let him recover a bit and then suggest we turn back. I could lie and say I usually didn't run much farther than this anyway. I offered a silent prayer that he wouldn't want to come again next week. Finally, his face returning to its golden tan, I just slapped him on the back and said, "come on. We're going home." I didn't make it a question or even an invitation. It was a command, and he followed it.

*

That afternoon, we watched the Seahawks on TV. Dave sat in my only easy chair, beer in hand, while I leaned against his feet. It wasn't a bad way to spend an afternoon, but still, I missed Foxfire. On a normal Sunday, I could have been riding him instead of sitting on this floor, my butt numb against the thin carpet and hard floor. I still hadn't told Dave about riding—I'd save that, I had decided, for when I could show him Foxy in the flesh. I'd let Dave feed him a carrot, watch for Dave's reaction to horse slobber and nuzzling. It wouldn't be long now, another day, empty except for Dave, and then Foxy would be here.

Friday, I would start at the hospital again, on night shift for now, until something opened up in the day. 11 at night to 7 in the morning, I would be taking pictures of the insides of people, locating their diseases. I was lucky to get my old job back at all, regardless of the timing of the shift, so I wasn't about to complain.

Thinking of work as I stared at the blank walls of my apartment, Dave's tibias against my scapula, I thought about bones. At birth, a human child has roughly 300 bones, but many of these fuse, and our adult skeleton has only 206. With age, we grow more rigid. Our underlying structure knits and sets, until we break more easily than we bend.

I reminded myself of this fact whenever it was time for a change: the move to New Jersey and the move away. Flexibility and growth. I thought of it now. I could still bend, I told myself. I could make space in my home for this man who was so enraptured with me. I could even give up my weekend run if need be. I had nothing to train for anyway. I would claim his adoration, the small gifts he gave, his need to touch me. His love. I would write off any resistance to my bones, my age, and will myself more forgiving. From this moment on, I would embrace this man and the love he offered, because there was nothing wrong with that. Nothing that I could see.

I'd buy a sofa the next day, I decided. Something cheap from Goodwill. From this point on, I would have furniture for two people to share, because humans, like horses, were herd creatures, and I had held myself apart too long.

After the game, Dave ran out to his truck and came back in with his hands behind his back. "I brought you something," he said, and again he smiled in the shy way that made me want to crawl into his pocket. He held out a wrapped package, a bow affixed to its center.

"What's this for?" I said.

"Nothing," and then, "it's for being glad I met you."

I ran my finger under its taped edge and pulled back the paper. It was his book: *The Count of Monte Cristo*. I looked at him, trying to figure out what this meant. "You don't want to give this up," I said. "This is your favorite."

He looked at me, his eyes soft. “I want you to have it. I want you to have something important to me. It’s like having a piece of me.”

*

The next morning was cold but clear. Foxfire came off the semi stiffer than I’d thought he would, feet stocked up right to the knees and hocks. I gave him some bute to reduce the swelling and turned him out in the paddock to recover from his trip.

He knew he was home. As soon as his head poked out of the trailer, he lifted his nostrils and inhaled, trying to trot down the ramp in spite of his stiffness and unshod hooves. His legs seemed to hitch as they moved; his steps, short-strided and clunky. In the paddock, he threw up his head and whinnied, calling to the horses in the surrounding pastures, announcing himself.

And in that instant, in spite of everything, I knew I wouldn’t tell Dave about him after all. Not yet. In that instant, I had my Foxfire back and all to myself. I didn’t feel like sharing. He’d be my secret for a little while, anyway. Until my hospital work started, perhaps. Foxy and Dave would each have their time, compartmentalized instances of my undivided devotion. Foxy would be my own private moment of the day again, like he had been those first brief days when I got him, when only my parents knew I was a horse owner, when my afternoons had the golden magical luster of a dream come true, before the dream became so familiar that it lost its aura and became everyday normalcy.

I thought of Dave’s book, of how he was sharing his passion with me, and wondered briefly if it was wrong to keep Foxfire a secret. I justified it to myself: I’d tell Dave soon enough. Then, he could feed Foxy carrots with me and stroke his soft nose. Heck, if Dave wanted to ride, I’d even give him some lessons. Just not yet.

*

Dave and I picked up my new sofa that night, an old plaid thing with a knobby, loose-woven fabric. Its gold and browns matched my orange chair, I'd decided, though its shape was not nearly so eye-pleasing. It looked like something a grandmother would overlay with lace doilies. It looked like something home-y.

Dave stretched out on it and nodded his head in approval. "Nothing like yards of bad plaid," he sighed. "Looks like a used car salesman, but it's a whole lot more comfy."

I picked up his feet and dropped them on the floor, plopping down next to him. Plopping down with a little too much gusto, as it turned out: I felt a spring pop behind me. Its metal dug into my back. Ignoring it, I smiled and nestled into Dave's muscled shoulder.

*

Sometimes I think love is based mostly on ego. I think of my two weeks with Dave. I loved the way he looked at me, how it made me feel beautiful and powerful all at once. His wanting increased my wanting, desire built on desire, until my head was fairly spinning with it. It was easier to like Dave than to dislike him. He was so caring, so strong, so intelligent. He was the type of guy that all women were supposed to fall for. When he wrapped my hair around his fingers, my curls reminded me of the tendrils on my mother's pea plants, how they stretched outward from the stem until they found the chain-link of Pilate's dog run, then wrapped themselves in tight coils, using the fence to support their growth as they reached towards the sun. I decided I would wrap around him just as thoroughly, hold him that close.

I'd never been in a relationship that moved quite so fast, that was physically intimate without ever being intimate in other ways. He knew so little about me. In the end, I never told him what mattered most. (Why open the Pandora's box of prejudices and false assumptions that people have about girls who ride?) I told him a little about work, but never much. He knew

nothing of my passions, nothing of my fears. When I look back, that was what it was all about—me not having to put my self into the relationship, just my body. My thoughts, my reflections had no place in this type of relationship, and, aside from the fleeting qualms that I knew marked every relationship, I didn't think much about what was happening. After years of avoiding men altogether, I craved Dave's touch, its electric charge running through my bones.

All this was blown to pieces one Sunday night when, an hour before I was due at the hospital for my first shift back, Dave said he had to tell me something.

He'd been distracted all day, touching me more than usual. He seemed always to be testing the water; his conversation was tentative as a toe dipping into the surface. I had a sense that there was an issue he was avoiding, and I started to panic a little, thinking about how smitten he seemed, wondering if he might be the type to propose to a girl he'd only known two weeks, thinking I was going to have to slow things down. Or maybe it would be something as simple as running: maybe he would admit that he wasn't up to it, that I could run alone. But when he finally sat back with me on the sofa, me laying against his arm, him stroking my hair, his little announcement was of an entirely different nature, something I was even less prepared to hear than a proposal.

"My wife and her parents are coming into town tomorrow with the moving truck. They should be here by three." (My slack jaw, my paralysis.) "We're off to the lawyers to sign papers, close on the house, you know, and then we start moving in."

"Your wife." I sat up. I tried to think of why I should have known that he was married. His words implied he'd mentioned her before, though I knew he hadn't. "How long?"

"What?"

“How long have you been married?” It was a stupid question. It was totally irrelevant to our situation. I still needed to know.

“A little over a year.”

I turned to face him. “You’ve cheated before?”

“No.” Again, that earnest look of confusion that he’d worn that first night at the bar.

I stared at him, my anger growing. The shape of his body, the blue of his eyes, the tousled lay of his hair, everything seemed like a puzzle, or a lie, or a trap. “Why should I believe that?”

“Why would I lie?”

But suddenly I seemed to know him in a way I hadn’t until this moment. “You *have* cheated before.” I barely had voice enough to say it, but I willed the voice to come anyway. “You went into that bar that night, that dirty, skank ass bar, looking for an easy lay. My God.” I shook my head, not wanting to believe what I was saying though I knew it was true. “My God, you thought that was me.”

“No.” He laid his hand on my arm, “I never saw you that way. Don’t say that.”

The heat of his hand, its weight, made my skin crawl. I shook it off and rose from the sofa where we sat, the sofa I had just bought. Our sofa.

“Christ,” he said. “We didn’t even sleep together that night.” The edge of anger tinged his voice.

“Yeah, but I’ll bet you didn’t sleep alone. I left the bar, but you sure as shit stayed. My phone number in your pocket and on the look out for some other—”

“It wasn’t like that.”

I shook my head. It was a moot point anyway. I wanted him gone, off that sofa, out of my house. Even feet away from him as I now was, my skin was still crawling. I wanted him out of my life altogether, out of this small town where I would surely run into him sometime, somewhere. His presence was suffocating, crowding, claustrophobic. But instead of ordering him out, I said, “Shit, do you even like your wife?” Because before he left, I wanted to wound him, to shame him. I wanted to ask how he could do this to me, but instead I asked how he could do this to her.

He answered the question I didn’t ask instead. “You were different.” He stood up, hands open and offering. “I love you.” He shrugged as he said it, as if it were all so unavoidable, as if it was just a trick of fate. That’s how he saw us, I knew: destined for each other, like Romeo and god-damned Juliet. “This isn’t going how I meant it to. I love you.”

“You don’t know me.” I was relieved to know it was true, and to know that, however unintentionally, I had protected myself from this moment: his confession of love.

“I want us to be together. I don’t want this to end.”

I couldn’t believe he had the nerve to say it, and somehow I’d always seen it coming. “Not an option.”

“Joan” he said, coming towards me.

“You leaving your wife?”

He stopped. “It’s not that simple.”

Such a trite answer. I almost laughed. “It never is.”

“No,” he said, “it’s more than that. Her father is my boss.”

“Of course.” I said. He didn’t work for his father but for his father-in-law. It made so much sense. I knew so little of his history, but I pictured it now how it must have been. Him,

leaving home, leaving his high school sweetheart with her big money daddy, and going to college. Dad sees daughter distraught, sees his foreman skimming cash, and finds an excuse to bring her boyfriend home, if he'll marry his baby. And why wouldn't Dave take that offer? Maybe I was just being cynical, maybe it was just the moment, but in my imagination, it had the ring of truth.

I looked at Dave and said, "You need to leave my house."

"Joannie." His voice pleading, his hand outstretched.

"Go, now, or I call the cops, and they can make you go."

He bit his lip and again I saw anger rising in him, setting along his jaw and pulsing in the vein of his neck. He seemed to loom over me in that moment. I'd forgotten just how tall he was, just how strong.

"This is my house," I said. "This is my house, and you will listen."

He smiled and shook his head at me, the admiring glance that had fueled my desire mingled in his eyes with his rising anger. "I'll call you tomorrow," he said.

"Your wife," the *cut* of that word, now a tool in my hands, "will be in town tomorrow."

"I'll find a way to make this work."

"I highly doubt it."

He walked to me. I stood my ground, glaring at him as he stroked my cheek. "I can't give you up," he said.

"Get used to trying." My voice broke on the final word and I cursed myself for not being able to make my words hold firm. The whole scene felt scripted. I walked to the door and held it open. And, finally, he walked out. I noticed now (why hadn't I seen it before?) that he was wearing the same green sweatshirt from the bar that night. We had begun and ended in the same

outfit. The outfit he'd come from her in, the outfit in which he'd return. Anger tensed along the bones of my face.

"I'll call you," he said again. I slammed the door.

It's funny how confident my words were, making him leave. I don't know where the strength came from. I don't want to admit it, I didn't then and I really don't want to now, but part of me wanted to fall into his arms. Part of me wanted him to pet my hair and say it would all be just fine. I think back on it now, and I wonder why I asked if he was planning on leaving his wife. Would I have taken him back had he said yes? Would I have considered it?

I despised this weakness in myself. Maybe that's where my strength came from: self-loathing.

*

Night shift: I, the ghost of the bone room, sitting in that dim room long past midnight with my humming machines. Under the weight of lead-apron, I shrouded other bodies in lead, rolled them around on my cold table under my cross of light, and took pictures of skeletons. I had to remind myself: I was no ghost. There was something solid in me. Something inflexible and comforting.

Dislocations, compound fractures: I have seen what the body looks like where bones are displaced: how it sags. The wobble of skin like partially set pudding. It's not a pretty sight, but an important one; a reminder. Without something rigid at the core, a framework of bone, we are scarcely human, scarcely even mammal. A human bone is many times stronger than a steel rod of the same weight. When a living bone breaks, it reknits and grows whole again. The repaired bone will be thicker than it was before, unlikely to break again in the same place. I am not a man of steel, and for this I am grateful. I am a woman of bone.

I imagined his wife. I saw her in my mind: a blonde Barbie doll with a Southern belle accent. I saw her in a hoop skirt and straw bonnet, a Scarlet O'Hara to his Rhett. She'd be some little perfect thing, I thought.

Some *little* thing, definitely. Not like me. We can never be taller than our skeletons. Our bones determine our vantage, our carriage, our abilities. Our understanding of and interrelation with the world is determined, to some extent, by the bones we inhabit.

My job: to see the bones within. I've looked at so many now, I feel like I see skeletons even without x-rays. I'll see a man at the farmer's market, talking to a neighbor maybe, and I'll start piecing him together: the long, straight femurs, the curve of pelvis, the notches of spinal column. I thought of Dave that way now. Under that damned green sweatshirt, under those powerful pectorals, delts, and traps, he was nothing but a narrow-shouldered skeleton, like the rest of us.

*

After work, I went to the barn. My mind was tired and fogged. I didn't want to go home, but I didn't ride. The early October morning was cool and damp, tough weather for arthritic old bones like Foxfire's. I just brushed him and brushed him, focusing on nothing but the bloom of his coat, bright as a new penny.

Later in the afternoon, after a fitful rest, I came back and rode. My eyes burned from being open too long, and weariness seemed woven into the honeycomb of marrow that formed my skeleton. Foxfire and I strode through the newly turned fields, stubbled with shafts of harvested wheat. The ground was surprisingly soft under Foxfire's feet, the frost only on the surface. With each hoof fall, I felt it give a little, then hold. The loam's crumbling was only a way of gathering strength as the earth compacted itself: strength enough to hold the weight of a

horse, the weight of its rider. I focused on nothing but that for an hour, then turned home, groomed Foxy, and returned him to the cozy warmth of his stall.

*

I went over the facts. All in all, my relationship with Dave lasted ten dates, if I included the night we met in the bar and the night we broke up. Seven *real* dates if I didn't. I saw him mainly at night, but four of our meetings included dinner. After the first night, we always met at his place or mine and stayed there. Perhaps this should have raised my suspicions, but it didn't. After all, why pay for movie tickets when renting is cheaper? Why pay waiters and chefs for food I can make better myself at a third the cost? It isn't as if Moscow has many fine dining options, anyway. The Best Western's restaurant, a great gyro place downtown, Eric's café, a dozen Chinese take-out spots, a half-dozen pizza joints, and one little fusion place by Friendship Square. Good enough, in their way, but nothing you'd seek out. Our dating had never struck me as secretive. Only practical.

I'd slept with two other men before Dave: the first, at twenty-one, to get rid of the albatross of my virginity; the second, shortly after, to try to erase the memory of the first. After that, I'd pretty much decided sex wasn't worth the trouble it brought. Now, I was kicking myself for not remembering that.

I had no intention to lose much sleep over the bastard, but intention wasn't always enough. Lying in my day-lit bed, trying to rest up for night shift, I replayed our final conversation over and over in my head, trying to think if I'd said the right thing, if I was firm enough. Anger would fill me, pulsing against my veins. I would lie there, hot, seething with rage and frustration, kicking off my quilts in spite of the first breaths of winter that whistled through the casements and doorframes.

In some ways, I decided, human relationships are less intimate than the relationship of horse and rider. The horse and rider share a goal and move towards it as a team, operating as one body, one mind. People, even people in love, spend most of their time moving in different directions, learning how to compromise their personal desires to meet their partner half way. Like my dad, how he moved to Idaho for my mom. He wouldn't have done that on his own. It worked out, but there was still a personal cost.

With Foxfire, there was never a question of equality in the partnership. I was in control, and I determined where we went. It sounds dictatorial, but it's a power hierarchy based on necessity. He's bigger and stronger; he could hurt me if he wanted to. To prevent this, I have to have his respect and he must listen to me.

In the herd, respect is hard won, a battle of teeth and swift kicks. Riders aren't so brutal—or, at least, the good ones aren't. As Eddie used to tell me, you give a command, and you give it with just enough force so that you only have to say it once. Don't beat, but don't nag either. Foxfire caught on quickly: a squeeze of the calf, a shift in my weight, and he would redirect his course accordingly. I rarely thought about the cues I gave him anymore. Riding him was as automatic as walking, something the brain did without my conscious thought. I had come to move Foxy's body in the same way I moved my own. It was as if we shared a mind, mine giving direction and course, his determining the mechanics of movement, the placing the footfalls. He alerted me to the frightening things that could spook him, and my confidence lent him the confidence to move past those things. It was the ultimate intimacy.

With Dave gone and well gone, I would return to that, I told myself. I would draw strength from Foxy's strength and the open Idaho sky stretching over us.

Dave: just an obstacle cleared.

CHAPTER 2

LOOKING FOR A FENCE

1. Time, Shift.

While circling, the rider looks towards the first fence, establishing a course, setting a rhythm.

June came, and I was still circling as much as I had been those first few weeks back. Nine months of dormancy. At first, it seemed nothing had changed much. Nightshift has a way of erasing time, the dark nights anonymous, one melting into another. Only when I was with Foxfire did there seem to be season and time: snow melt, green sprouts unfolding themselves from the dirt; sunshine, cloud. With his jump gone, our rides were less exciting than they had once been. A trail ride, some low level dressage work (leg yield, half pass, turns on the haunches and forehand)—things that didn't ask too much of him but kept his joints moving so the arthritis wouldn't worsen any faster than it already was. But his body was another kind of clock, ticking with each stiffening stride, gradually and nearly invisibly winding down. I tried not to think of that.

Something about the dryness of summer brought the desert landscapes of southern Idaho to mind: the dust looming over the roads, the hot still quiet of the air.

Back in college, I had a friend named Holly who was born and raised on a dairy farm in southern Idaho. The summer after our sophomore year, she invited me to visit for a week. I'd never been to a dairy farm before--they're a southern Idaho thing, so, I leapt at the chance. I

figured, if the Pod could make it over White Bird Pass, it would make it all the way to Fruitland. It was nearly a six-hour drive, but I had a road atlas and a letter from Holly detailing the way.

Holly's directions were, by and large, excellent. They gave the easy route, included two short cuts if I was brave enough to take them, and told me in which towns I needed to obey the speed limit, towns where the police departments survived—even flourished, judging from the police cars (shiny new Iroqs and Ford Explorers)—on the revenue generated by speeding tickets.

The first short cut was easy enough (the road well marked; a turn from the highway that shaved a half hour from the trip), so I resolved to take the second as well, an unmarked and unmapped gravel road around Payette, one of the few sizable towns I would pass through on my drive. Since it, like most gravel roads in Idaho, had no name and therefore no marker, Holly had identified it by landmarks: a fruit stand, a Pepsi sign. Her directions indicated that I would see this road just before coming into Payette. I hit the city limits and had passed several homes when I turned around, figuring that I had missed my turn. I had passed one road that, with a little imagination, could have been the one she meant. On the corner stood a small red shack with a decrepit porch where one might sell fruit if one was so inclined, and a nearby billboard advertising a Payette gas station featured a pair of sweating Pepsis, one regular, one diet, resting in ice.

I followed this road a good way—fifteen minutes at least—when it teed and I knew I had made a mistake. Holly's directions said nothing about the road dead-ending into another road. I sat at the stop sign for several minutes, gazing down the intersecting road in either direction, deciding what to do. There was nothing on the horizon but farmland, but to go back would mean I'd wasted half an hour on a wrong turn. Roads, I decided, even gravel ones, were built to go

places, and the most obvious place for this road to go was to Payette. If not, well, I'd backtrack after a noble fight.

Since I had turned left off the highway, I turned right on this road, and as I crested the second hill, I was relieved to see what I was certain must be Payette. Sure enough, the road took me into town and, eventually, intersected with the highway. I'd taken the long route, but I'd found my way, and I'd done it without maps or a knowledgeable person pointing the way. A gut decision, a little logic, and I made it.

When I arrived at Holly's, she and her father greeted me and asked how my trip was, and I told them about my little adventure, of getting lost and journeying to found. Holly's dad, with the wry, thin smile of a middle-aged Idaho farmer (a smile so slight it could've been mistaken for a grimace), said only, "Well, y'aint *too* dumb."

Instantly, I liked this man with his easy manners, his underlying grin. The only serious thing in the world was the herd, and what could be more absurd than cows? The slow chewing jaws, the life spent in mud, punctuated only by the sound of grain sliding down its metal chute from truck to trough, and the twice-daily marches into the barn where metal machines sucked at their straining udders. A ridiculous life, and not much different from most people's: a little work, a little McDonalds, a little television. My life would be different, I vowed. I would strive for something—anything.

That week, I rose with Holly and her dad before the crack of dawn to feed. I wasn't much help, but I learned a lot. By the end of the week, I had driven and operated a front-end loader and a three-wheeler (already illegal in Idaho except for farm use), I'd fed a new calf (a male, so I joked, as I straddled him with bottle in hand, that I was officially a bull rider), I'd read the scales in the feed truck to help measure and the right amounts of silage and grain, and I'd

helped chop up fifty heads of cabbage for Holly's mother's famous sauerkraut (we sampled some of the previous year's for dinner that night, fried up in the electric skillet with sausage and apples).

Still, as I thought of it that still, hot summer day on Foxy's back, what struck me most was that early wrong turn, the decision at the crossroads, and the route I had found to get me where I was going. I did not need to know the road, as long as I knew where I wanted to get to. With a goal and my own ingenuity, I could find my way. If I could just determine what I wanted now, I could somehow break from this tedious circling. (Trough, mud hill, barn :: home, hospital, barn.)

I thought again of the circles a hunter horse and rider make in preparation for the course, bending and collecting. The illusion of circles, when you are circling, is that nothing changes from journey around to the next. The illusion of circles is stasis. Beginning each repetition around the circumference, you are exactly where you were when you began. Only, time is passing. My trips around my circle were only another type of hand on another type of clock. Around me, seasons shifted incrementally, and though I couldn't see or feel it, I was aging, and I knew, when I stopped to remember it, that I was wasting my life away.

Four things happened that month to punctuate my trips round the circle that still bound me. One had already happened: Nancy McConnell, another radiographer at Gritman, was moving to Boise, leaving an opening in the 7AM to 3PM shift that I, happily, took. It was a little less money, since I was foregoing the bonus that night-shifters got, but it meant a return to the land of the living, the life in the sun.

The second happened that afternoon, when I returned from our aimless trail ride.

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2. Jenny:

There was a new car parked in front of the barn, and, once our eyes adjusted to its darker light, Foxy and I discovered a newcomer in the barn: a wispy-thin girl/woman, roughly my own age, with thin, transparent blonde hair poking under the edge of her shiny new safety helmet, was trotting around the indoor arena. She rode in sneakers (a no-no) and blue jeans that appeared to have been recently ironed. Connie, the barn owner, had mentioned that she had a girl coming in to ride Zip, that the girl was partially leasing him so she could learn to ride.

Zip had been named with a distinct sense of irony. He was a fat stubborn Appaloosa whose favorite gait was standing--preferably standing and eating. Like most schooling ponies, Zip was dead to the aids (voice, seat, hand, leg). True to form, he was ignoring this girl's kicks and her pleas to, "come on, can-ter."

I pulled Foxy's tack off and fastened him in the crossties, giving him a quick but thorough grooming. "Geez Louise," I heard the girl say, make another round, trotting away. *Geez Louise?* I thought. Was she watching her language on my account, or was that really how she talked? Even watching, a steady flow of appropriate curse words came to mind, all aptly descriptive of Zip's total lack of effort.

"Need a hand?" I said.

"Sure." Her face was red and she was breathing rather heavily as she continued to trot.

I walked Foxy to his stall at the end of the barn aisle, grabbed my dressage whip, and then climbed the pipe railing into the riding arena. "Stop him a sec," I told her. Neither she nor Zip needed a second request. I patted Zip's neck and looked the girl in the eye (as blue and as shallow as a baby pool, I thought). "Mind if I hop on for a bit?"

The girl swung herself off, a little awkwardly, but not too bad. “I’m Joan, by the way,” I said, and she told me that she was Jenny and pleased to meet me. I took Zip’s bridle in hand and mounted.

Zip walked on easily enough. The trot required a firmer squeeze. I let him settle in to the work a little, plodding his school horse plod, then asked for the canter. I asked softly at first, then a little more assertively, and when I was ignored both times, I asked again, this time accompanying the squeezed leg with a sharp flick of the whip. I got exactly what I expected: pinned ears and a quick pony trot. So I halted him, backed five paces, and started again. And again. On the third time through the sequence, he cantered. It was a flat, jolting canter, his nose poked forward and his body totally out of balance. So we did it again. Zip knew what he was doing. He knew how to canter off correctly—I’d seen him successfully show third level in the dressage ring—but he also knew how to avoid cantering off correctly. Zip wasn’t going to behave until he was sure that I knew what I was doing as well.

He wasn’t a bad horse for someone to learn on. He was safe, relatively spook-proof (spooking required an exertion of energy) and well mannered, and, by God, he would teach a rider to command control. I dismounted and handed the reins back to waifish Jenny, thinking Zip might be just what she needed. She looked like she could blow away in the first strong Idaho wind. “Every time you get on a horse, you train it,” I told her. “Zip’s had a bunch of people on him—a bunch of kids—so he’s learned he doesn’t always have to do what you say. He’s learned that, more often than not, the rider is going to be too nice or too scared to ask him to work. He’s learned he doesn’t have to do what you say. Our job is to remind him that he does.”

Jenny smiled gratitude, and I knew I would like her, even if she wasn’t the sharpest knife (her blue eyes seemed so very vacant). Anybody who could take me butting in and offering my

unsought advice with so much grace was all right. Zip turned, looking for the carrots that usually came with lessons. Empty-handed, I scratched him behind the ear instead.

“Is that your horse?” she asked, pointing over to Foxy’s stall.

“Yes.”

“He’s beautiful.”

I smiled at the compliment. It was true: he was beautiful. “Have you met Dawn yet?” I asked.

Jenny looked mildly confused.

“On the short side with tall hair and loud pants—usually Wranglers,” I suggested. “Rides a bay Quarter Horse and cleans stalls.”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I haven’t met too many people here yet.”

“Well, you’ll meet Dawn sooner than later—she’s here all the time. We try to meet up for a trail ride on Saturday mornings at ten. If you don’t have plans, you should come.”

Jenny hesitated a moment. “I’ve never taken Zip out of the barn.”

“Then this is a good opportunity. Dawn and I’ll make sure nothing happens.”

Jenny nodded and said she’d try to be there.

*

3. Eddie:

I had dreamed about Foxfire that night. We were back in the barn in New Jersey, and I was with Foxy talking to a black-haired, faceless vet in his stall. The stall was dimly lit—after nightfall, but I didn’t know how late. Foxfire rested his head against my chest, softly pressing his blaze against my sternum, letting me share the weight of his body the way horses do with members of their herd. I let him rest easy there. His long ears flopped lazily to the side,

ambivalent to the soft, staccato hooting of an owl somewhere outside. “It’s time,” the faceless vet said, and I knew he wasn’t talking about clock time. He opened an old-fashioned black leather medical bag and prepared a shot, Foxfire’s last shot. “You don’t have to stay,” he said, and I recognized the voice as Dave’s, but it didn’t seem weird, and I wasn’t angry. His voice was comforting and familiar. “It’s ok,” I said. “I’ll stay.” The vet *was* Dave now, in flesh as well as voice, and he turned, stroked Foxfire’s neck, and slid the syringe into the vein. I watched him depress the plunger, and suddenly I needed to make him stop, to yank the syringe out of Foxy’s neck, to smash it on the ground and crush it under my boot heel until I’d reduced it to nothing more than glittering dust, but my hands were heavy with dream’s gravity, and I could not lift them in time. Dave turned, put the syringe back in his small black bag, and started to chuckle softly. It angered me, but I was too busy with Foxfire to say or do anything. The weight of Foxy’s head pressed more heavily upon me, and I stepped away. He dropped to one knee, then the other. He groaned like he always does when he drops to roll, except maybe a little quieter. I reached out to him and helped him ease his head to the ground. Cradling his jowl, satiny soft in my hand, I suddenly realized we’d done this in the wrong place. We wouldn’t be able to get him out the stall door. Dead horses are not easy to move. The two people I’d known who’d put their horses down had done it outside, near where the grave would be. They bulldozed the body in later with a small Cat, the one they used to drag the arena. I bent and tried to shake Foxy’s shoulder to wake him up so he could move, like a mother trying to rouse a child for school, but Foxfire’s eye was already distant and glassy and I realized that he was gone. My knees gave. It was that falling sensation that woke me up. My pillow was hot and wet, and I was choked with sadness, even though I hadn’t been crying in the dream. I felt stall-bound and desperate. It was

as if I was watching a movie of someone else's problem, but it wasn't anyone else's problem and this dream, I realized, would come true.

I got up to make some coffee, strong and black. I washed my face while it brewed. Exhaustion knitted into my marrow; my bones felt heavy, over-dense. My skin, too—like it was weighing against cheekbone and temple. How could something as real as Foxfire just stop? I splashed cold water on my face, rubbed it into my eyes to get the sand out.

It was Tuesday. I drove to the barn before work. With luck, I'd catch Connie riding or getting ready to ride—she always tried to get her own horse worked in the quiet hours of morning, leaving afternoon for boarders. I wanted to talk to her, to get her opinion on what I should do with Foxy. Connie was exactly the type of rider I had missed when I was in New Jersey. She, too, had been Eddie's student for a while, but most of her education had come from the horses themselves. She claimed she rode before she walked. No one I knew was more knowledgeable. She didn't look like a rider—at least, she didn't look like the riders in magazines. Connie was a short, solid woman with flaming red hair flying out the back of her helmet and large red hands, the type Palmolive called dishpan hands, but I knew these hands were roughened by dirt, not soap. A far more respectable way to ruin your skin. We were all ruining our skin together out there, exposing our hands and faces to the harsh white winter sun, the chapping winds, the dust that never settled but only changed colors: the August dust turning our snout hard and black, the January snow dust stinging our cheeks and crusting our eyelashes. Idaho could turn tender skin into leather, but, then, we were not dishpan girls.

Connie's husband had died four years before, just before I left for Jersey. Pancreatic cancer. He was only 37. She had had twelve of her own horses, brood mares, geldings in training, mostly quarter horses she'd trained for the hunting ring. We all knew she couldn't

afford them, not alone, not with the medical bills, not on her PacBell paycheck. She sold them all, except the brood mare pregnant with Soldier Bill (the foal she would name for her dead brother), and Zip, whom she first used for a lesson horse and now leased to beginners, and she took on more boarders. No one asked if she was sorry to see the horses go. We knew it had been hard, and we knew she would not admit that. She was tough like that. If her face was a little ruddier now than it had been, if the Jim Beam slid down a little easier than it used to, none of us would fault her for that.

When the diagnosis had come all those years back, we'd held a Poker Ride, and I think just about everyone doubled their entry fee so that Connie could have a bit extra. But you could see the lines of her face harden when she took the check. You could see the pride she swallowed, its bitterness setting her stoic line of mouth. That was the last charity she would allow.

She was already in the arena working with Bill, now over three and being broken to saddle, when I got there. She'd sold the mare when it was time to wean, and now he and Zip were her only horses, the only connection to the small herd she'd once owned.

Connie free-walked across the diagonal, allowing him to stretch his neck out and down, then collected the reins in the corner and asked for a canter at C, a pattern I recognized from the training level dressage tests. I stayed out of the way, wondering if they were prepping for a show.

When she halted at X, she looked over at me.

"I need your advice," I began, and I told her about Foxfire, about the tripping, about how he pulled his hind feet away from me now when I lifted them to pick his hooves, about how he leaned on the bit, putting his weight against my arms, asking me to hold him up. He didn't want

to put any more weight into his hocks than was absolutely necessary. “I don’t want to ride him if it’s hurting him.”

Connie sighed. “You thought about retiring him?”

“Thought about it,” I conceded.

“He’s got pasture turnout.”

“True.”

“So he can move and stay limber.”

“The problem is,” I said, “I still want to ride. I’m saving for the next horse, but I don’t have enough yet, and I can’t do two board bills. So if I don’t ride Fox, I’m SOL.” I hoped I didn’t sound like I was whining. I steadied my voice. “Anyway, I thought I’d ask if you had any advice for me. You’re the only person here who really knows their stuff, jumping-wise, at least. You’re also the only one around here that doesn’t trash on Eddie.”

Connie picked a stray piece of hay from her shoulder. “That’s who you should talk to.”

“Who? Eddie?” An odd piece of advice. Dawn told me he moved before I came back from Jersey, back in August or something. “You got his phone number? I don’t even know where he is. Dawn just said he’s moved.”

“Only for a sabbatical. He’ll be back.”

“What.” My cheeks grew hot. It was just like Dawn to leave out that bit of the story. Years ago now, she’d taken one lesson with Eddie. He told her she had a chair seat, her weight too far back in the saddle, and he wouldn’t let her jump until she learned balance. He made her work on basic two-point position and trotting cavaletti for the whole lesson. When I saw her later she was fuming, complaining that he’d charged her thirty bucks for a lesson in what she already knew how to do. Her anger at Eddie never subsided. She’d always tried to convince me

that he was as bad as she thought he was. I wasn't surprised that she'd withheld some facts, but I was irritated nonetheless. "When does he get back?"

"I don't know. Should be any time. His wife's teaching in southern Cal somewhere for a year and they took the family."

"Yeah, Dawn told me that; only, she made it sound permanent. She said he'd sold all his horses."

"Nah. He just leased them out. One's with Pam Westerfelt in Lewiston and the other is with some woman I don't know out in Walla Walla." Connie picked a stray red hair from her lips. "I think they stayed down in California while she taught some summer courses and they traveled around a bit. Rough, right? All those beaches? But I imagine they'll be back here for fall term at the University. Don't they start up at the end of the month?"

As mad as I was with Dawn, I was angrier with myself. "I should've kept in better touch."

"Yeah you should've. We were all wondering what happened to you out there."

"I'm not much of a phone person."

"Or a writer, apparently."

"Yeah, I was bad. Shit, though, I didn't know Eddie was coming back. That's the best news I've heard in a while. I could kill Dawn."

Connie smiled and dismounted. "You won't."

I stared off into the dark corner of the arena, where the dust drifted and settled. "I know," I said.

*

Connie was right, of course. I met Dawn and Jenny that Saturday for our ride and never even mentioned Eddie. Sure enough, Jenny also showed, bright and early, new paddock boots on her feet and Zip brushed to a high gloss.

On the nearby hills, the wheat beginning to turn less green; soon, it would tan, and then fade to the ever-lightening blondes of the end of summer. The wind washed through the tender blades in swirling currents. Along the roadside, wild apple trees were becoming heavy with fruit and an occasional porcupine. Young dogs would come home that month bearded with quills, a mistake most only made once.

June, as usual, was a fairly dry month, interspersed with the occasional rainstorms that watered the crops. In six weeks or so, the hulking combines would begin their slow weave, back and forth, mowing the hills and filling trucks to take the harvest who knows where. I'd heard once that television was invented by a southern Idaho farmer plowing his flat fields, the lines from work giving him the idea for the lines of pixels to make an image. I imagine him sometimes, his boredom on his tractor, his desire for moving images rising in dirt.

Overhead, the dry heat stretched Idaho's big sky thin. Its blue fades by midway into a sullied white: dusty, untouchable, and distant. That sky made me glad of the comfort of friends and horses: the heavy things that ground us. We stuck mostly to the gravel roads, dusty as they were. Foxy had shoes this summer only for this, the iron easing the way for his tender feet. In fall, after harvest, when the stubble was turned, folded back into the dirt, Foxy would go barefoot again. No need to shoe a horse who couldn't jump and worked on soft ground.

A red-tailed hawk watched us that day, taking off as we approached his weathered fence post. The only sounds were the cry of that hawk, our idle chatter, and hooves crunching on gravel. I breathed in, wanting to inhale it all: this moment.

“You’re quiet today,” Dawn said, turning to me. I had Foxfire following that day, so he would check his pace a bit to suit to shorter legs of the other horses.

I shrugged and smiled. “I’m always quiet. I’m the strong, silent type.”

Dawn laughed and Jenny, bless her, said, “I thought it was just guys who were strong, silent types.”

“Could be guys,” said Dawn, reflecting and apparently serious. “Could be guys, could be gals. Why not?”

Jenny looked at her and then at me, trying to determine, I guessed, whether we were making fun of her.

“Oh fuck if I know,” I said. “I don’t see why it couldn’t be girls.” I said that mainly for Jenny’s sake. I’d seen her several times at the barn that week, and we’d talked while cleaning our saddles, the saddle soap acting like an odd sort of truth serum, the barn as another type of confessional. I’d learned that she was a traditional type of girl. Born and raised in south Georgia, she’d married four years back, the summer after her high school graduation, to the high school sweetheart who’d graduated a couple years ahead of her. He worked; she kept house. In my mind, he looked like Ward Cleaver, short black hair gelled back, a grey suit for the office. He gave Jenny an allowance out of which she paid for horse board, lessons on Zip, and, I suppose, the new paddock boots on her feet. Already, I was learning to respect her more: she’d made not working a full time job, volunteering at the church, being a big sister to a local kid, but I couldn’t help feeling like I had something to teach her, that she needed mentoring in the ways of strong women.

But she irritated me, too, always talking about “her husband.” That’s what she called him: my husband this, my husband that. Where Dawn just said “Russ,” Jenny said “my

husband,” and I couldn’t quite work out why. Did she value his role, husband, over the person himself? Did she think we would? Was she just that formal? Or did she repeat “my husband, my husband” to emphasize her own role in the world: Wife.

“My husband said the funniest thing last night...”

“My husband’s been grumbling a bit about the amount of time I’ve spent at the barn...”

[Dawn: “They all do that.”]

“My husband’s mom makes the best coleslaw you ever tasted in your life...”

Grating, grating, until I was just about to snap, but the world snapped first: a pheasant, spooked perhaps by the rocks Zip kicked when he walked his foot-dragging obstinate walk, burst from the tall weeds in the gutter, green head and brown feathers, its red-circled eye, its quick panicked chuckchuckchuckchuck. In that instant, the three horses spun and bolted, racing across the road, jumping the short bank (Foxy with that magnificent powerful thrust of haunch muscle that was otherwise absent now—fear blocking the arthritis), galloping on into the growing fields. Dawn and I were able to pull up after several strides. Zip, empty saddled, slowed and turned only a few paces on, his herd instinct and laziness more effective than reins.

I stared at the bare saddle. “Shit.”

It was the type of thing that happened all the time, but I’d told Jenny that it wouldn’t, as if the presence of Dawn and me could stop horses from bolting. I’d given her the assurance that nothing would happen, because usually nothing did, but horses are a flight animal, and they had flown. A momentary disobedience, reminding us that we weren’t in control. I glanced back, but I couldn’t see Jenny over the stretch of field and the bank’s lip. I walked Foxfire over to Zip and grabbed the reins, while Dawn rode back to check on Jenny.

I didn't want to see Jenny and didn't want to know what happened. Already I was constructing worst-case scenarios: a broken spine and life long paralysis, a broken neck and an already cold, white body. But as I approached the bank, I could hear the girls talking, and it was that that gave me the courage to lead Zip the rest of the way.

I crested the bank to find Dawn dismounted and standing over Jenny, helping her pick rocks out of her forearm. There wasn't much blood, just enough to make the dirt stick. The injury was only skin deep, but the skin was where the nerves were, and my arm stung in sympathy with hers. As I got closer, I could see the tears standing in her eyes and hear the quaver in her voice.

"You ok?" I asked.

Dawn answered for her. "A little shook up. Her hip's pretty good and sore, but this" (holding up Jenny's grated forearm) "is the only damage other than bruises."

"Thank God for helmets and thick blue jeans." I smiled at Jenny, but she didn't return it. She looked drawn, even paler than usual, and terribly, terribly sober. "We all come off sometime," I continued, "no matter how long you ride, but as long as you can get back on," I was wishing now that I had been the one to come back and check on Jenny. Foxfire was a tall horse—just shy of seventeen hands. Sitting there, literally on my high horse, looking down on Jenny in her ditch, I was unwittingly imperious, everything was giving the wrong impression, and now, there was nothing I could do about it. I held Zip's reins forward, an offering.

"I thought you said nothing would happen." Jenny said it quietly, her tone low and serious: an accusation. I was dumbstruck.

It was Dawn who answered. "Nothing did happen."

Jenny looked at her arm, letting the blood speak for her.

“You’ve got two friends at your side,” Dawn continued, “your horse was caught, and you’re able to ride. You’re scratched but y’aint broke.” Her backhills Idaho accent was thickening—a sign that Jenny’s weepiness was beginning to work on her nerves, too. “You’re earning your stripes. You want to be a rider, then you’d better get used to it, and the sooner the better.” She took one last look at Jenny’s arm and nodded. “Time to get back on.”

This was why I loved Dawn, because Jenny, chastened, listened to her and because I would never have had the balls to be so blunt. In that moment, I forgave Dawn her lie about Eddie. I could have kissed her. Jenny still looked shaken, but she put her boot in the iron and mounted, muttering “my husband’s going to kill me when he sees this. He always said riding was a dumb idea.”

(Your husband, I thought, can fuck himself.)

“It isn’t his call, now, is it?” Dawn’s thin, shrewd face, daring Jenny to contradict her. Russ called her “Spitfire” when she got like this, his eyes full with love and admiration. I felt it, too.

“It’s his money,” Jenny shot back, chin up, eyes flashing.

“Don’t you ever believe that.” Dawn didn’t advise now, she commanded. “You keep his house, you fix his meals. You earned that money. Those are your wages, and you’ll spend them how you like. Don’t let him forget that.” There was an added edge in Dawn’s voice; we were on the grounds of a fundamental belief. “I’m sure he spends plenty without consulting you.”

Jenny was quiet and thoughtful—we all were—as we rode home. It was desperately quiet; the stretch of empty sky and empty land offered no noises of its own. We rode up to the house first instead of to the barn, stopping to ask Connie for some sterile gauze and to give her

warning that she'd soon get an unhappy phone call from her neighboring farmer when he saw our tracks through his field. Connie folded Jenny under her wing, cooing to her like some awkward, oversized bird. Jenny ate it up, her wispy blonde hair mixing with Connie's red as she leaned on Connie's broad shoulder.

Dawn and I led the horses back to the barn. We'd just gotten them all back in their stalls when Jenny walked into the barn, arm neatly patched. She was smiling, and her step was a little less steady than it had been earlier. I wondered if Connie had offered a nip of medicinal bourbon, just a little something to quell the sting.

"Connie says I owe you all a beer," she said brightly.

I was amazed at how quickly we were forgiven, but I would see this again and again from her: the quick return to equanimity. This wouldn't be her first fall from a horse—no rider ever has only one; her loss of confidence never lasted long.

Dawn grinned. "Hey, that's right." She laughed. "I always thought that was a bit of a raw deal—the one who falls having to buy the round."

Jenny shrugged. "What are you guys doing tonight?"

"I don't know," Dawn said. "Leftovers and rent a movie?"

They turned to me, eyebrows raised. "Same thing I do every night," I said. "Go buy food, watch TV, and contemplate my disastrous lack of a life."

"Then I say we all meet at El Mercado's at six, Budweiser all around."

It would be Bud. Always Bud. But beggars can't be choosers, and I knew that bad beer was an olive branch not to be turned away. Dawn and I were in.

"Good," Jenny said, seeming to grow a little taller. "That's settled then. You'll all get a chance to meet Dave, and, Dawn, I'll get a chance to meet your Russ."

“Dave?” I asked, my stomach sliding away from me.

“My husband.”

“Great,” I said, trying to muster as much false enthusiasm as I could.

*

Over the several hours, a steady internal lecture droned in my head as I attempted to reassure myself. Moscow was a small town, but it wasn't that small. 20,000 people, more or less: that's a lot of Daves. How likely was it that the one Dave I happened to know would be Jenny's Dave? They'd moved to town around the same time, both from the South, but what did that mean? Moscow was a university town, and people moved in and out all the time, people from all over the place. Shit, out of the 180 people in my graduating class, only 27 of us had gone to school in Moscow since kindergarten; that's how mobile the community was. And would the Dave I knew really be attracted to Jenny? I mean, she was a sweetheart, but totally different from me, and not at all the stunning Amazonian Barbie Doll goddess I had imagined as his wife. I couldn't imagine him doling out an allowance. I couldn't imagine him having the patience for a woman who would expect one.

When I got to El Mercado's, Dawn and Russ were waiting for a table, and Jenny and her husband had not yet appeared. Dawn's hair was standing at its usual gravity-defying height, hairspray lending it a sheen under the lights; Russ's hair, crew cut, seemed to stand in salute to hers. Russ had worn his hair the same way over all the years I'd known him. The style suited his broad, honest face. Looking at him, I knew he would look the same at sixty as he did now: a little greyer perhaps, and sun-lined, but he'd always fill his denim shirt with the same sturdy shoulders and his blue eyes, the same faded blue of denim, would always shine with laughter.

Russ was just one of those people who you could depend on never to change. Time couldn't touch him.

The waitress came and had begun to lead us to the table, when Jenny and Dave charged in the door, laughing at some joke they'd shared running from their car to the restaurant door. I glanced back, and nodded my head for them to follow. Jenny, in front, led Dave by the hand: her Dave, my Dave.

I smirked as I nodded, of course. Who wouldn't, under the circumstances? But Jenny didn't seem to notice. Surprise registered on Dave's face, but I turned away before my own expression could betray me. The last thing I wanted was for him to acknowledge that we had any prior acquaintance. When Jenny introduced us at the table, I grinned my cheesiest grin to hide my clenched jaw. If I flinched when I said, "nice to meet you," no one remarked on it. Jenny couldn't have seen anyway. Her eyes were on Dave the whole time, filled with the adoration and pride of a love-struck woman. Dave didn't return her gaze. Mainly, he kept his eyes focused on the table, partially hidden under the shag of his hair.

Mariachi music pumped from the speaker above our table. Soon: chips, salsa. The waitress came, a short woman who would have been slender except for her large, pregnant belly. Jenny ordered a round of margaritas—an appetizer, she said, for the Bud. I drank it down as quickly as I could without getting brain freeze, and, when the pregnant waitress passed by our table again, I flagged her down and ordered a second. Dawn yahooped this—her highest praise—and followed suit, and Jenny ordered the pitcher of Bud for the table. I was going to get drunk tonight. I'd halfway decided that before leaving the house (one reason I'd walked the half mile to the restaurant instead of driving), but seeing Dave confirmed it. Plus, I loved the way margaritas felt on the back of the throat, the way they scratched that unscratchable itch.

I don't remember who brought up the subject of regrets. I have a feeling it came from this drink order: stories of worst hangovers and wildest parties leading naturally to biggest regrets. It became a sort of party game, everyone having to tell theirs in turn.

Dawn went first with a story from childhood, an early hunting trip. She'd gotten her first gun for her birthday that year, her sixth birthday. It was a rite of passage in her family. Her father had taken her out a number of times to practice shooting at cans, and a paper target, but she hadn't tried to kill anything yet. She was itching to, though, she said. There was a picture of her cousin on the mantel, grouse hanging from its feet, gripped by his tiny hand. It was his first kill, she said, and she was eager to have her own picture join his on the mantel, eager for her own accomplishment. One day, a few weeks after getting the gun, she was out with her father practicing, and she saw a chickadee flitting around on the branches of a nearby hawthorn. "Can I shoot him, Dad?" she asked, and he laughed. "Sure, baby doll," he'd said. She shot, and sure enough, she hit her target. It fell quickly and without struggle, one shot, one kill. Immediately, she knew she'd done wrong, she said, killing such a small thing, totally defenseless. She turned to her father for reassurance, but he, too, was solemn. "Hot damn," he had said, voice shaking. "I didn't think you'd actually hit it." They walked up to get it, and it looked even smaller than it had in the tree, its wings akimbo. Not meat, not threatening, just a small innocent thing that she'd killed for the heck of it, to prove she could.

Dave interjected here. "You were too young to know."

"I don't know about that," Dawn said. "I knew I could hit it, or, at least, I was pretty sure I could. And I knew when I did it that I shouldn't have. It seems like I should have been able to put two and two together before I pulled the trigger."

My teeth felt like they were beginning to float in my mouth. Our waitress returned, and we placed orders for food. She wrote everything down wordlessly, and as she made her way around the table, I thought about my father. Dawn's story reminded me of a story he'd told me once, his biggest regret, too. He'd found a seagull nesting in some rocks on an ocean cliff side. He'd been practicing for the baseball team and decided to see how good his aim was by throwing rocks near the bird. *I just wanted to see it fly*, he'd told me. At first, he'd thrown wide of the mark, then closer and closer, and then, one went just a little off from where he'd intended to throw, and hit the gull right in the head. The head dropped right into its nest, and he knew he'd killed it, but he watched and waited, hoping it was only unconscious, praying it would get up again. At sunset, he gave up and went home. He never forgot killing that gull, killing all the chicks waiting to be hatched in the eggs she refused to leave. Listening to Dawn, I began to wonder just how common the story might be.

The tiny, dark waitress waddled off towards the kitchen. "Dad tried to make me feel better when we went home," she continued. "We even took the bird home with us to show my mom. It was so light in my hand, almost as if it didn't weigh anything, and then again, it was heavier than I thought it would be. Dad took my picture on the Polaroid, holding it by its little foot, so I could show my cousin when he and my aunts and uncles came for Sunday supper. He even stuck the thing in the deep freeze so they could see the little fellow for themselves."

Russ, unable to stay serious any more, burst out laughing, sputtering something incoherent about bird Popsicles. Soon everyone, Dawn included, was laughing: loud, unselfconscious, alcoholic laughter. "That damned Polaroid is still on their mantel," he said, as soon as he could get the words out.

Dave volunteered Jenny to go next. I tried to think of something to say I regretted, but kept coming up with things I didn't want to talk about. I regretted moving to New Jersey. I regretted moving home. I regretted Dave.

Jenny stunned no one with her totally lame regret: "I regret cursing at my father."

"Oh, fuck me if that counts!" Dawn reeled back in her chair. "I spill my guts about killing a poor little bird and the best you can come up with is cursing at your daddy?"

(I regretted taking Jenny on a trail ride so early and getting her hurt, I regretted swiping Butterfingers from Rosauers and cheating on my U.S. history final in high school even though I never got caught at either.)

"No," Jenny said, looking wounded. "Come on. It counts. It was serious—you don't know how my Dad and I were. We had a really close relationship, and I nearly wrecked it."

"Key word: 'nearly,'" said Dawn, but she let Jenny continue.

"It was back when I was in high school. My dad and I had always been real close, like I said. My mom died when I was a kid," (this softened Dawn's hard stare), "so it was always just the two of us. We'd do all sorts of stuff together that dads and their daughters don't normally do: go shopping, make cookies—he even helped me choose my prom dress. But he never was quite sure about Dave." Numbness spread through my cheekbones, tequila's anesthesia.

"That's putting it mildly," Dave interjected here. "Her old man hated me."

"He didn't hate you. He just wasn't sure. And think of it from his perspective. He didn't want to give up his baby to just anyone."

I could see Dave fighting himself, wanting to say, I imagine, that he wasn't "just anyone," but he kept quiet. (*I still regret you, Dave, I thought. I still do.*)

“Anyway. Dave gave me a promise ring our senior year, and my dad hit the roof. He said there was no way he was going to let me marry Dave. He said he didn’t think Dave could offer me the economic and emotional stability I deserved. That’s exactly what he said: economic and emotional stability. It escalated from there, until I told him that I was eighteen and an adult and he should mind his own f-ing business.”

“Only, you didn’t say f-ing?” Russ was grinning.

“Right. I didn’t say f-ing. My poor dad. I had thought he would explode or something, but instead, he got real pale. I thought for a moment I’d killed him he was so pale, like he’d had some sort of seizure or heart attack. Then he got up and walked out of the room. He didn’t say anything—not then, not for weeks. I started to think he’d never talk to me again. I kept begging him to forgive me, to try and give Dave another chance, but it was like he couldn’t even hear me.” Jenny stopped to take a bite of food. No one said anything.

“Eventually, he started saying little things,” Jenny said. “ ‘Pass the potatoes,’ or ‘will you be needing the car tonight?’ That sort of thing. And then he talked a little more and a little more. Things didn’t really ease up until Dave went off to college. I guess Dad figured we’d break up. I don’t think he thought Dave would come home for me, but he did. And then we got married. Now, Dad and Dave work together, and everyone’s happy. It all worked out in the end, I guess. Only, I wish I hadn’t ever said that to my Dad. I wish I hadn’t hurt him like that. Sometimes, I think it’s still not quite the same.”

No one asked how it came to be that Dave worked for her father—I guess that story seemed to tell itself—and no one asked whether Dave agreed with Jenny’s assessment of everyone’s happiness. I wondered whether their marriage was instigated by rebellion: Dave’s

need to prove Daddy wrong at all costs. Or maybe Jenny was more powerful than I'd given her credit for: able to construct her own happiness.

I was still trying to come up with a good, tellable regret. I regretted selling the Pod. I regretted not doing more for my friend Jennifer in high school, Jenny 1 as I thought of her now, to make her ditch her loser boyfriend. I regretted not visiting my parents more often. I regretted the last pair of shoes I bought. Tomorrow, I would regret drinking these glasses of Bud and bottles of Coronas—but not the margaritas, never the margaritas.

I thought of my own moment of animal cruelty, back when I was four or so. We had this cat, a stray my mother had fed. We'd named him Rumpelstiltskin, but we always called him Rump, which fit, my father always said, because he was a pain in the rump. I don't know where I got the idea, but I decided he needed a collar, something to show he was owned now, but we didn't keep cats for pets and didn't have a collar that size, so I found a thin blue rubber band and put that around his neck instead, and promptly forgot about it. About a week later, Rump's neck started oozing—the nasty green and blood-streaked ooze of a festering wound. My mom took Rump to the vet, me in tow, and she soon discovered the rubber band. As soon as I saw it, I remembered putting it on, and realized I was responsible for hurting this cat. I didn't understand how it could hurt him—it had gone over his head so easily and it was so slender and stretchy—but I knew it was my fault. But I didn't say anything. My mother and the vet were outraged. They assumed it was some local teens with a cruel streak.

It wasn't a regret exactly. Rump soon recovered and, over the years, fully paid me back for the rubber band. My arms were constantly covered in small scratches, and once I even got cat scratch fever, an infection that made my pits so sore I could barely lift my arms and required a shot from the doctor. Rump was never a cuddly or friendly cat, and when he vanished one day,

we wrote his disappearance off to a coyote and didn't give him much of a second thought. I had never meant to do wrong to that cat. I'd learned from my mistake: not a regret worthy of this current game.

Dawn turned to Russ. "Your turn."

"Mine's easy," he said, with the broad, class-clown grin he always seemed to wear. "I regret not banging Brittany Anderson in high school."

That table erupted in a shock of laughter. Jenny said, "If my cursing my dad doesn't count, than that one doesn't either." Her voice was higher, more girly, more emphatic, voicing her objection.

"Clearly, you never saw the rack on Brittany Anderson." He held his hand in front of his chest, pantomiming the copious handfuls. "Back me up on this, Joan."

Russ was also a Moscow High graduate, though two years ahead of me. For me, Brittany was only a blur of red hair, dark eyes, and pouting frosted lips, but the memory of her impact on the guys at the school remained, even through the alcohol's fog. "She was pretty hot," I said.

"Pretty hot?" Russ rolled his eyes. "The girl was totally amazing, and she was supposed to be totally easy, too."

"Hot, yes," I said, voice skeptical, "but when did you honestly have a shot?" Russ began to bark a protest, but I cut him off. "I think you're dodging the issue."

Dawn turned to Russ and raised an eyebrow. "Busted," she said. "You'd better cough up a real regret."

"Ok, ok." Russ shot a pseudo-glare my way. "I regret having teased Melanie Richards when we were in school. Actually, 'teased' may be the wrong word. Tormented, is more like it.

“Not that it was my idea,” he hastened to add, “Rhonda McMillan put me up to it.” He turned to me. “Do you remember her?”

I searched my memory, but drew a blank and shook my head.

“Yeah, not a lot of folks do. Rhonda moved away before junior high, but back at Russell Elementary, Rhonda was the shit. Melanie moved to town at the start of fourth grade. She seemed nice enough, just small and quiet. She wore these really ugly glasses, the kind that were big and round and had those thick frames, but looking back, I bet she grew up to be pretty attractive, or at least not bad. But for whatever reason, Rhonda decided she didn’t like her—said she was weird and a freak, that Melanie wore clothes from the poor box at their church, blah, blah, blah. I don’t know if it’s true about the poor box. Mel’s clothes were out of date and a bit worn, but they could have just been hand-me-downs. I think Rhonda made the poor box thing up to bring more folks to her side.”

“La Cucharacha” trumpeted through the speakers, its rolling, celebratory brass at odds with the stories of regret. I don’t think I’d ever been to El Mercado when this song hadn’t played. I imagined it was on every music mix they had, a song we Idaho gringos would expect to hear.

“Anyway, it worked, because pretty soon, everyone hated Melanie. Even the girls who’d been friends with her at first wouldn’t be caught dead with her. I guess everyone was just worried that Rhonda would persecute them as well.”

“There was a girl just like that at my school,” Jenny said quietly.

“Mine, too,” said Dawn. “I think every school has one.”

“And I guess their tricks are always the same,” Russ continued. “Rhonda made rules for the playground: only girls wearing this kind of jeans or that kind of tee shirt were allowed on the

monkey bars this day, or on the swings that day. It shifted hourly, and only she ever knew the rules. Then, Rhonda started in with me, asking me to flirt with Melanie and stuff, just as a joke. She'd found out that Mel had a little crush on me or something. I hedged and tried to get out of it, but Rhonda started hinting that maybe I didn't want to do it because I liked her back and maybe she'd tell the whole school that I was in love with Melanie Richards.

"I should have let her say what she wanted. Looking back, I bet she wasn't so tough. If she'd tried to pit herself against me, I don't think my friends would have deserted me as quick as they split on Melanie. I'd known them longer, and guys don't seem quite as mean to each other as girls can be. We don't want to alienate someone who we might need later to make even teams for football at recess, or whatever. But I didn't see that then. I wrote Mel all these notes, Rhonda standing at my back, telling me what to write. Then she'd pass them to Mel. Stupid stuff. At first it'd be about how hot I thought she was and how I dreamed about her, then later there were notes about how I wanted to kiss her and would she meet me at the flagpole at noon. She'd show, and there would be Rhonda to laugh at her, at how stupid she must be to think someone like me would be interested in someone so poor and ugly. I should've stopped Rhonda, but I didn't. I just kept writing those damned notes."

I knew the rest of the story, but I wasn't going to make Russ tell it. It wasn't very uplifting. It was an everyday story, a story everyone knew, about a girl driven so far down she couldn't possibly recover. Fill in the blanks with the story from your own school.

The waitress brought fajitas, chili Colorado, carne asada, etc., and I ordered a round of Corona and limes for everyone. She took the order with a nod and waddled off.

"I feel bad she's carrying all our food," said Jenny, her voice low. "That tray looks so heavy; surely, that's not good for the baby."

I searched for something to change the subject—preferably away from regrets in general. The topic was damned depressing. I looked at my plate. “You know, in New Jersey they charge extra for guac?” I said.

The rest of the table stared at me, and I thought this might actually work; I might actually distract us from the things we wished we hadn’t done. “I went to a place with some of the staff at the hospital when I was there, and I couldn’t believe it. It was, like, two bucks or something to get a tiny little plastic cup of guacamole, and when I said I thought that was a rip off, everyone there was surprised we got ours for free.”

“That’s totally ridiculous,” Dawn said. “Two bucks?”

I enthusiastically nodded: an absurd price for guac.

“Maybe avocados are just more expensive down there,” Jenny suggested.

“I don’t know,” (this, from Russ, who was giving me the man,-you-are-wasted look)
“Florida’s just as close to them as California is to us. They grow avocados in Florida, right?”

“Hell if I know.” I shrugged. “I thought they grew all the same stuff as California, oranges and shit, but maybe they don’t do avocados. Weird, though, huh?” That’s what first struck me about moving: the accumulation of all the little differences. I thought this was where I could move the conversation next, and we could talk about how everyone says about how homogeneous America is now, television culture making us the same, but it isn’t true because, in a million tiny ways, we are different. Nothing radical. Just odd little things that built up until I realized one day I could never understand people there like I knew them here. I could say how I thought that was a good thing, all those differences maintained, well worth the price of guac. The map of talk stretched forth in my head: the routes to follow, the turns in the road. Soon, we’d be so far away from regret that no one would try to steer us back.

Jenny foiled my plan in a stroke. “OK, Dave’s turn.”

I looked at Dave, knowing he wouldn’t come clean and admit the affair—at least, not here, not like this—but I feared it nonetheless. He was pointedly not looking at me, staring instead at the fajitas he was methodically gathering with his fork and loading into his tortillas. And then I started to worry that, if he didn’t, maybe I would. My tongue was already loosening in my mouth; in fact, it felt physically loose, as if it might roll out at any minute. Then I started thinking maybe I *should* tell. Maybe Jenny should know what kind of a man Dave was. Maybe that would be the best thing I could do for her, as her friend. Even if she hated me afterward, at least she would no longer be devoted to a loser. Who could compete with that kind of regret?

“OK,” said Dave, “mine is from back in my first year in college. My mom called and said her sister, my Aunt Ruby, was dying. Stomach cancer. The doctors had given her two months,” he paused, then said, “My mom and my aunt were always close. They were twins, and I guess what they say about twins is true, how they feel each other’s pain? Because when I went home that weekend to visit mom, she looked pretty rough, like she was sick, too. She talked to me about when we could fly to Baltimore to see Ruby—that’s where Ruby was living. She had a job there at some company. Anyway, my mom wanted to fly out right away, be there for her, you know? But I dug in my heels.

“I was working at this little junk shop downtown. The owner was really cool—just a nice, nice man, and pretty easy going about working with my school schedule and stuff, so I never had to worry about when I could take which classes the way other kids I knew had to. But I knew that if I took off too much time, he’d probably find someone else to fill my job. He’d have to—I couldn’t just take off two months. Plus I would have had to drop school that semester, and that would have been a pain in the butt, retaking all those classes.” (Dave said it as

if college hadn't meant much to him, and I didn't know whether the tightness in his voice was more from memories of Ruby or of college.) "I figured I could take a week, maybe two, without severely impacting my life. Mainly, I was worried that we'd end up being there a lot longer—you know how people are always saying the doctor gave someone three months and they ended up living three years. I thought she'd be around for a while yet.

"So I told my mom I couldn't go for at least a month, and that we should wait until later--when she'd really need us, those final days. I was thinking probably should wait a full month and a half. I wanted to be there for Ruby's last moments and the funeral, and then get back to business as usual. I don't think I even realized she was dying, really, if that makes any sense. It didn't seem that final. I mean, I loved Ruby. But I convinced my mom, who never had much money, that she should wait a bit to go see Ruby rather than making a whole bunch of trips.

"We argued for a while, said nasty things, but in the end, I convinced her to hold off for a bit. It just made economic sense. We called Ruby that Sunday, and she sounded tired, but that's how you expect a dying woman to sound. I told her that Mom and I would be coming in a few weeks' time. I could tell she was disappointed; her voice sounded even more tired, but she didn't ask us to come any earlier. I went back to school Sunday night, and on Thursday, my mother called me. Ruby was dead. I guess she just gave up the fight, figured there was nothing much to hold on for. My mother was devastated, and I felt like such a jerk. I mean, it was my fault she didn't see her twin sister on her deathbed. I was so worried about stupid shit that didn't mean anything: extra classes? losing a job? There was no rush to get through school—I mean, Christ, I didn't end up getting a degree anyway—and there would've been another job, but I can never have another chance to see my aunt. I blew it."

The table was silent. Dave's regret had everyone's beat. (*It isn't a competition*, I reminded myself.) If I told about Dave and me, our two weeks together, him sleeping in my bed, his confessions of love, that's the regret everyone would remember about this night, the memory they would carry away, baggage. I wondered if any of them would speak to me again. This night, this conversation, I knew it was supposed to be about us all knowing more about each other in the service of friendship. Not that it had been planned that way, but through this, we were becoming a group. With a few words, I could wreck all that.

My thoughts swam in alcohol and confusion. Dawn looked at me. "Well," she said. "You're up. The last regret of the night."

I looked at her, sitting there, her sprayed hair intentionally standing on end, her beaded shirt sparkling in the light, and at Russ next to her in his faded work shirt. I looked at Jenny, her towhead and bright smile, and at Dave, whose amazing eyes would not meet my gaze. I looked at the way his shaggy hair curled around his ear, as if his ear could use a good hug. I looked at his fingers as they traced an image I could not see on his sweating beer glass.

"I regret nothing." I said.

Dawn set down the beer she was raising to her lips, and Jenny said, "You can't regret nothing." Dave jerked his head up and stared, his eyes locking briefly with mine, then looking away. His cheeks warmed with a blush, but no one saw it but me.

"I regret nothing." I repeated, staring back at each of them in turn, daring them to contradict me. "Everything I have ever done has lead me to this moment, so I regret nothing." In a stroke of genius, I raised my glass. "To friendship," I said, and in the clink of thick bar glass on thick bar glass, I was off the hook. Everyone was finished eating anyway, and the pitcher was empty.

We split the check and tipped the waitress heavily. As we left, we wished her luck with the baby, which she took with the same silent stoicism as she had taken our dinner order, black-brown eyes absorbing our words and offering nothing back. Hers: another story I wouldn't know.

The air felt like something I could lie across and swim in. I concentrated on my feet and staying upright. I had offers of a ride home both from Dawn and from Dave, but I passed on both. The last thing I wanted was to be squeezed into a pickup cab between either happy couple. Besides, the night was lovely. Summer heat still radiated from the sidewalk, but the air was beginning to cool. The sky was cloudless; the glare of streetlights hid all but a few of the stars. I started thinking of Dave, of what was hidden and what was revealed, and how very difficult it was to see him clearly, in any light.

Months ago, back in the cold of November, I was content to write Dave off as a cheating slimeball with good acting ability. He played nice guy well. Now, I was confused again. He was definitely wrong to cheat on Jenny, though her fawning trust seemed almost to beg for bad treatment (*don't blame the victim*). I wondered more than ever about the circumstances of their marriage, about why her father had so thoroughly changed his mind. I wondered if Dave was also a victim.

Dave's story about his aunt's death was working on me, too. I fancied I saw I pattern here: the rash error in judgment, followed by repentance. For a moment, I thought that that was our story too. And wasn't it my story, wasn't that New Jersey in a nutshell? "Small-Town Girl Dares to Think She Can Compete with Socialites."

My beer-thick tongue laid fat in my mouth. My limbs tingled and floated as I crossed another street, a tree-sheltered side street, on my way home. I thought of Jenny again, how good

a person she seemed. Her trust, the trust that I blamed for her trouble with Dave, was one of the things I appreciated about her. From our first meeting, she had liked me and trusted me, and even though I'd let her down, let her get thrown off her horse, she trusted me still.

I had done something that would crush her if she knew it. I was thoroughly awash in guilt. Granted, I hadn't known her when I committed my sin, but how much did that matter after all? I felt the eyes of the stars I could not see looking down on me from behind the harsher glare of the streetlamps.

I thought of a long ago conversation with Dave, back when there was no Jenny.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" he'd asked.

"I'm not sure I believe in Love, let alone love at first sight." This comment made Dave snort a laugh, and we were both silent a moment, weighing what was said and trying to determine what should be read between the lines.

"Bad experience?" he asked, his ice-colored eyes seemed warmer.

"No experience." I shrugged. "A crush now and then, nothing more."

He moved closer. "And you don't think it's out there for you?"

His breath, hot on my cheek, was dizzying. I was losing my bearings. My self-assurance was on the ebb, leaving only the emptiness of desire. "Honestly, I don't know." My voice sounded husky and foreign. I began to feel I'd been disembodied by his nearness, but I wanted him closer.

"You'll find it," he said, and leaned in closer to kiss my neck. "A girl like you," his words formed against my neck, lips brushing as he spoke, "I'm surprised you haven't been scooped up already"

“Scooped up?” I’d said, brought back into myself. “Like ice cream? like dog shit? I’m not sure I want to be scooped.”

And he laughed, resting his forehead in the bend where my neck became my shoulder, the floating sensation returning with his touch, “You are so different from anyone I’ve met before,” he’d said, his hand now sliding over my back.

“It’s not intentional.” I’d said.

He was so good at making me feel different. I could have almost believed in love at first sight with him, if only because he seemed so thoroughly smitten.

The brown siding of my building loomed above me, dark though lit by white streetlight. The sidewalk before me like a bleached bone, the path I walked. Home for now, I staggered up the concrete stairs to the door of my apartment, and already dreading the headaches tomorrow would bring.

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4. The Man With No Name:

Clint Eastwood is one of the most beautiful creatures God ever created: the lash-fringed flint of his cold stare, the lean length of him. Who else could make a poncho look so damned *tough*? And the way he sat his small grey horse, not so much balanced as melded. A perfect rider.

The new guy working the express lane at Rosauers struck me as similarly beautiful, though I’ll admit, there was little they had in common.

Maybe it was just his eyes. Something Clint-ish about them, though I couldn’t say just what. This guy’s were almond shaped, gold-flecked brown. And where Clint might scowl, this guy smiled. Maybe it was the tall thinness, the boot cut jeans. His hair was long and straight,

and I suspected some Coeur d'Alene or Nez Perce blood. It fell down his back, fluid and shining.

His flannel shirt had seen better days, faded almost past the point of really qualifying as plaid any more, but it was clean and tucked in, per store policy. He chatted easily with the customers in front of me—effortlessly and, it seemed, genuinely. His name tag read “Jed,” but I knew Jed, and this wasn’t him. It was his nametag, the pink smiley face sticker covering the bottom curve of J, but definitely not Jed. A loan, I figured, until the store manager got around to making a new one.

“Welcome to Rosauers” the new guy said, turning to me after wishing the last customers a good day. “Did you find everything all right?”

“Welcome yourself,” I said, a little audacious. “You’re new here.”

“Sure am. And you must be a regular?” Around us, people talked, registers scanned and beeped, lights hummed, but those noises faded as he spoke. I wanted to become small, to curl myself up in the curve of his soft, warm lip, to rest there, like the child cradled in the moon from the old cross-stitch that still hung in its dark frame in my childhood bedroom.

I ignored his question and asked my own. “Got a name?”

“Yes.” He smiled at me, that damned smile that seemed so devilishly delighted with himself. Clint’s smile, I realized, only Eastwood was never so generous to offer his so often.

“Going to tell me?” I smiled back.

“I’ll make you a deal: I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours,” he said, weighing my tomatoes and typing the number into the register without looking it up. He may have been new to Moscow, but I figured he’d worked at Rosauers somewhere else before. He was too at ease, too familiar with everything.

“Oh,” I said. “I’m not that curious.”

“We’ll keep it anonymous for now, then.”

“Fair enough.”

“\$7.09”

I pulled exact change from my wallet and deposited it into his cupped hand, smiling directly and defiantly into his eyes.

He nodded at his hand. “Have a good day.”

I nodded back and picked up my groceries. I walked out of Rosauers fairly sure I had just made a fool of myself, but oddly happy in spite of it. Mainly, I was thinking of the texture of his hair, how it shone as he moved. The obscene desire to slide handfuls of it across my face: how cool it would have felt, like water, I decided.

And thus, the quest began to discover the name of the man with no name. Over the next few weeks, I would talk to everyone in the store. I even tried to bribe Sam, at the meat counter, offering to buy double my usual bratwurst order if he’d spill. “Nothing doing,” he’d laughed.

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The following Saturday, I decided to visit my parents. I rode early, while Connie was still out working Soldier Bill (the shining black silk of his immaculate tail making me think again of the grocery man), then called Dawn to tell her to hit the trails without me, asking her to pass my apologies on to Jenny. By nine thirty, I was heading over the mountain. Mom was reading the paper on the couch when I walked in. Dad was nowhere in sight.

“Oh good,” Mom said, not looking up as she finished the article. “You saved me a trip. I was going to swing by today and bring you these.” She nudged a brown bag on the coffee table, full of zucchini, tomatoes, and summer squash.

“You been sneaking Miracle Grow onto these?” I pulled out a zucchini as big as my forearm.

“That’s all organic.” She looked up from her paper and smiled. “The compost this year is superb. Speaking of which, can you bring some manure next time you’re out?”

“Sure.” I was my parents’ horseshit connection.

Pilate walked over and pushed his head up under my hand, asking for loves. “Oh, am I being remiss?” I asked, plopping down on the braided rug and stroking the silk of his ears. Pilate never was a licker, but on rare occasions, he’s tentatively give a tiny kiss, his tongue barely touching skin and then disappearing. I got one of these now. “Better watch out, Mom. I’m going to steal Pilate and bring him home with me.”

“And violate your apartment’s no pets policy?” My mother smirked. Her smirk was the same as my own, the left corner of her mouth lifted and creased, the twinkle in her eye.

“They’d never know, would they Pilate?” He was such a quiet dog. I stroked him a little longer, then asked, “Where’s Dad, anyway?”

“Oh, he’s out wandering somewhere.”

“He didn’t take Pilate?” Dad wandering all over the hills was nothing new, but leaving Pilate was.

“Dad’s walks are a little long for Pilate now. Pilate goes out with me instead.”

I looked into Pilate’s soft brown eyes and noticed that they had begun to fog with age. Pilate: the dog who went on Dad’s walks and Mom’s walks and any other walks that were offered. Pilate: the inexhaustible. Now, he collapsed on the rug next to me, rolling halfway over and lolling his paw lazily in the air, begging a chest rub. He seemed content not to be roaming.

I helped Mom make falafel, stirring together cilantro and yogurt while she whirled chickpeas in the food processor. I wondered if the grocery guy ever ate falafel or if he would write it off as some hippie food, favoring a good rare steak like most Idaho men. He didn't strike me as a typical Idaho man, even though everything about him (shirt, eyes, hair, lean but tautly muscled body) seemed to belong to the place.

When Dad returned, we ate lunch and talked politics. I left in the mid afternoon, with large rubber tubs rolling in the truck bed and the promise to return them, shit-filled, next week.

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Three times that week, I tried to discover the name of the man with no name, but without luck. I couldn't get those light brown eyes out of my head, or that damned rogue smile. Everything about him seemed a challenge, and I wasn't one to back down from a challenge.

I took to riding Foxfire bareback, rationalizing that it kept my muscles in better shape, making me do the work of balancing without the aid of knee rolls and thigh blocks, saving myself from the bother of cleaning my saddle. Really, riding bareback removed the temptation to push him too hard.

*

Monday, Dave had called me at work to ask if I would go to lunch with him, the sound of his voice causing my every muscle to tense. "No," I'd said, voice low in this all too public phone.

"Come on," he'd said. "You said 'I regret nothing.' I can't stop thinking about that, of how you glanced at me when you said it. I can't stop thinking of you. You've been on my mind ever since that dinner. I keep thinking about us, the conversations we had about life, about books, you kicking my ass at running." (I could almost hear his smile through the phone.)

“Joan, I need you in my life, and you need me, too. You don’t regret our time together, and I don’t either.”

I gave myself a mental kick. “Yeah,” I told him, “well, having no regrets doesn’t mean I’m going to make the same mistakes twice.” That quieted him a moment.

“Listen,” he said, “I understand that what we did before was wrong. Maybe we can’t be like we were before, but I really need you. I need someone I can talk to. I need a friend, if we can’t be more.” He didn’t whine. His pleading was more like a current running underneath the slow calm of his words. It was an unusually slow day, and I could easily have gone to lunch if I wanted to. I had to admit, I could sympathize. Dave: still fairly new in town, in a job that elevated him over his coworkers, not a lot of opportunities to meet friends. I’d been the new girl myself not that long ago, out of place and unsure of myself.

I turned away from Cheryl, the receptionist, who, I knew, was listening to every word she could catch, though she pretended to be filing paperwork in the nearby cabinet—she was never so busy as when there was a phone conversation to eavesdrop on. “What about Jenny?” My voice now so low in the phone that I was surprised he could hear me at all.

Dave said, “She doesn’t understand me the way you do.”

I wanted to explain to him that I didn’t understand him either, that he’d built me up in his mind as something I was not, but the sound of Cheryl flipping through manila folders behind me reminded me to keep it short. “Dave,” I said. “I am not interested.” I hung up, hoping that whatever parts of my conversation were audible did not reveal me too clearly to be the adulteress I was.

Cheryl gave me a conspiratorial smile as I leaned over the desk to hang up the phone. “He sounded cute,” she said. I decided I hated the way she did her makeup: too much mascara, lip stick too pink.

“Yeah,” I said, distracted a moment, then snapping back into myself. “But not my type.” Cheryl turned to Doreen, the other receptionist in Imaging, apparently hoping to draw her into this conversation, the conversation I was bound and determined not to have. Doreen stared, bored, off towards the door, clearly oblivious to Cheryl’s excitement.

“He sure sounded like he thought you were his type.” Cheryl chuckled, keeping her unsmiling eye on me all the while, looking for a reaction.

“Yeah, well, he’s wrong,” I said.

Doreen stood up. “I’m going for a cigarette.”

“Those things will kill you,” Cheryl said, smiling to show she was kidding. When Doreen left, Cheryl turned to me and said, “I hate to see a young girl like that throwing her looks away.” Cheryl herself took a lot of care in this regard, a care shown not only in the thickly applied makeup hiding her wrinkling face but in the coke-can curls of her hair, meticulously sprayed into place. “Those cigarettes are going to turn her skin and hair grey. I’ve seen it happen before.”

I shrugged, wishing someone would walk in through the door, so that I had the excuse of work, and also realizing how wrong it was to wish for that kind of work. “She’s fine,” I said.

“Are you, a medical professional, honestly telling me you think it’s fine she’s smoking cancer sticks?” Her pink lips stretched thin as she smiled again, making light of the question. My stomach dropped. I saw how my words were going to get twisted and repeated into Dr. Rivers’s waiting ears, and attempted a little triage.

“No. I mean, obviously, smoking isn’t good for you, but, you know, she’s young and smart, and I’m sure she’ll quit when she’s ready.” Even as I spoke, I could hear new permutations of what I said. I imagined Cheryl now “repeating” this remark to Doreen: *Joan says that, if you’re smart, you’ll quit smoking*, and I hoped that Doreen would know better than to believe Cheryl’s renditions. I could never find my feet when I talked to Cheryl.

“I’d better get back there,” I said, nodding down the hallway to my machines. “You know, just in case someone comes in.”

Cheryl shoulders fell almost imperceptibly, then quickly straightened. She smiled at me again. “Well,” she said, “don’t wait for tall, dark, and handsome to call again before you come back up here. You know how much I enjoy our visits.” And letting her have the parting blow, I turned back towards my small dark space.

*

A long afternoon of Cheryl avoidance, a short ride on Foxy. I decided a simple but delicious dinner was in order: the greatest sandwich known to man: romaine and blue cheese on whole wheat. I dropped by the Co-op for bread (fresh baked each morning, the best in town), but went to Rosauers for the rest. I could have bought it all at the Co-op and saved myself a trip, but the man with no name didn’t work there.

Brenda was stocking produce. She was Stan the butcher’s daughter, and inherited his sloping shoulders, but on her, they appeared jaded, forced low by the tremendous weight of the crazy world adults had made for her. Her hair, dyed black to contrast her pale skin and the burgundy of her lipstick, fell in backward bending spikes, as if they, too, could no longer muster the energy to fight gravity. Brenda was a shy girl, for all her bold appearance, and I had always liked her. I furtively tore a plastic sack from its dispenser and sidled up to her now, thinking that

perhaps I had found the co-conspirator who would help me learn the mysterious new checker's name. Surely Brenda would help me. She was in high school. She understood the importance of the senseless crush. Casual as could be, I picked an orange out of the pyramid she was slowly but carefully reconstructing.

"Weather's been scorching lately," I said, mainly because I couldn't think of anything else off hand and was trying to stall while I thought of a way to the information I sought.

"Before you get any further," Brenda said, studying the fruit on her plastic cart for the next block of pyramid, "I think it is only fair to tell you that I'm under strict orders not to reveal any names."

"Brenda," I said, plopping another orange into my sack. "I'm hurt. Really. I can't believe you think the only reason I would talk to you is to find out that guy's name."

Brenda smiled, but still didn't look at me. "But it is one of the reasons you're talking to me." She glanced at me, a sly twinkle in her eyes, "I mean, he *is* pretty cute, right?"

"If I were to agree with you," I said with mock seriousness, "I suppose said acquiescence would reach the ears of a certain someone?" I selected another orange. "No, I reveal nothing."

Brenda laughed. "Whatever, dude," she said quietly, her voice light with restrained laughter.

"OK, OK." I said. "Who is this new guy anyway? How has he gotten everyone's allegiance? I've been shopping here for years. I mean, take us for example. You've known me for months now. I'd hate to see that longstanding relationship compromised by some new fly-by-night checker."

I leaned forward to peek at her downward turned face. Brenda only shrugged, then shook her head and chuckled, with the air of a much older, more experienced woman resigned to the

foibles of life and humanity. “You guys have a weird way of flirting,” she said, then, before I could object, she gave a parting smile and pushed her plastic cart towards the red delicious, another pyramid to rebuild.

I had six oranges in my sack—when was I going to eat six oranges? I grabbed a head of romaine.

My luck at the deli was no better. As I sorted through wedges of Oregon blue for an appropriately sized piece, I tried to make small talk with Arlene, only to be immediately stonewalled. She had a ham to slice, she told me, walking away.

A little miffed at the way he had so thoroughly circumvented me, I grabbed a sixer of Newcastle Browns and headed for the checkout.

He looked away and sighed as I walked up. “Not you again,” he said, “don’t you work? I mean, really, get a job.”

I smiled my sweetest and said, “I’ve got an early shift.”

I should have told him to get a hair cut. I should have told him to get a real shirt (he always wore a rather sorry-looking quilted flannel). There were a million responses with more personality, more zing, and all I’d said was “early shift.” *My God*, I realized. *I’m turning back into a boy-crazed teen.*

He scanned my blue cheese. “I can’t believe you eat this stuff. Doesn’t it make your breath stink?”

“It keeps the vampires away.” (My stock answer to blue cheese inquiries.) My arms weighed just a little heavier in their sockets. He didn’t like blue cheese. I couldn’t imagine a world without blue cheese. I would have to resign myself to loving him from afar.

But he was thinking about my breath.

“I see,” he said and looked me in the eye. “16.97.”

I handed him a twenty.

“Normally,” he said as he counted my change, “this is the part where I say to come back and see us again,” his index finger brushed my palm as he put the three pennies on top of the ones, “but with you that seems totally unnecessary, so I’ll just say, ‘scram.’”

“Thanks. Very good business sense you have.”

At this, he smiled. His front teeth were only slightly crooked, and I wondered if he’d had braces and not worn his retainer, like me, or if his teeth were naturally so close to straight. I was looking at his teeth a little too long, I realized.

He shook his head at me. “See you tomorrow?”

“You bet.” I walked to the car, oddly conscious of the stains on my ass and wondering if he thought I was a freak for coming to the store, daily no less, in beat-up boots and dirty breeches.

I noticed, too, though, that he hadn’t named me either, and wondered what that meant. Had he not asked? Had they not told?

*

All in all, I was relieved when the weekend rolled around again. Between Cheryl’s needling inquiries at work and my total inability to find out the name of the grocery store man, I was looking forward to a nice, boring Saturday. A trail ride with the girls, a drive out to my parents’ for their personal brand of good home cooking. We saddled up in the relative cool and quiet of the mid morning, little other sound than the clink of stirrup against buckle as we tightened girths.

As we started off down the road, Dawn and Jenny chatted about their husbands, discussing the frustrations of dealing with men on a daily basis, and generally (unintentionally) making me very glad to be single. This morning, Russ had complained that they never got to enjoy a nice leisurely pancake breakfast on a Saturday morning any more because of our rides.

“What did you tell him?” Jenny asked, clearly shocked that Dawn was even here after such a conversation.

“I told him his options,” said Dawn, slumping back in the saddle with the casual confidence of an old cowboy. “He could get his ass out of bed earlier and we could eat pancakes, he could wait until tomorrow, or he could fix his own damned breakfast.”

Jenny laughed. “Dave does that sometimes, too. Complains about me going riding. Leaving him.” She said after a pause. “It’s weird. Sometimes he’s all supportive, says we should start shopping for a horse of my own and stuff like that. Other times, he says that I’m always at the barn and that I should spend a little more time with him. The crazy thing is, I usually come to the barn before he’s home during the week, so the only time he misses me is on these Saturday mornings. It’s like he’s jealous or something.”

“They all get a little jealous,” Dawn nodded. “You look at the riding magazines, they’re all full of advice on how to make children and husbands feel better about being deserted while women ride. I understand it, though. I guess I’d be jealous if I lost Russ every weekend to some hobby. Plus, it’s not exactly a cheap sport—they see the money going away and that adds to the problem. If you’re not a rider, it’s hard to understand the draw.”

We all were silent for a few moments, listening to the sound of hooves. I wondered if it was Jenny’s riding that bothered Dave, or whether it was me: the knowledge that I was here. Foxy snorted, clearing the dust from his nostrils. Already, the sun’s heat was growing. Now

nearly September, though still hitting highs in the nineties, it no longer got quite as hot as it had earlier in the month. Still, by one o'clock, we would all welcome a cool shower and an afternoon indoors, with husbands or alone.

I felt myself relaxing into the saddle and into the quiet of the morning. If I had thought I was going to be able to sit silent through this whole conversation, though, Dawn soon proved me wrong. She turned to me, grinning, and I knew the question that was coming even before she asked it. Too much talking about relationships, and not a word from me. Dawn's grin practically asked the question before she voiced it: "So Joan, how are things going on the love front?"

I smirked. "The love front?"

Dawn nodded. I wanted to make a comment, something about love and war, but nothing came to mind. Mainly, I was thinking of those brown and gold almond-shaped eyes and how they narrowed when he smiled. I tried to feign indifference and shrug off the question, but Dawn and Jenny weren't buying it. I've never been good at masking my feelings, and now I felt that both girls could see right through my calm right to the image of the man himself. I pushed thoughts of the grocery store man out of my head, but that damned smile hung in my mind and I was fighting smiling in return.

"Come on," Jenny said. "There's got to be someone you've got your eye on."

What the hell. "OK," I admitted. "There is one guy I'm sort of interested in. But I don't even know his name."

"Spill." This, from Dawn.

I tried to think how to put this so it wouldn't sound as ridiculous as I felt it was. "Well," I said, "he works at my grocery store."

“Rosauers or the Food Co-Op?” (Dawn knew me too well.)

“Rosauers.”

“Which guy?”

“The new one. Usually works the express lane.”

Dawn appeared to think for a moment. “I don’t know if I’ve noticed him, but then, I’m hardly ever buying just a few things, so I haven’t been in the express lane in a while.”

“What’s he look like?” Jenny asked.

“Tall, thin, long dark hair, usually wears flannel.”

“In this heat?” Dawn’s face flexed, suggesting there was something wrong with a man who dressed warmly in this weather.

“You know how they air condition the store. It’s usually pretty chilly in there.”

“True enough.”

“And it’s a pretty thin flannel.” My voice dropped slightly. “Actually, it looks like it’s seen better days.”

“He probably doesn’t make too much working at a store,” Jenny said.

“Checkers do all right,” Dawn interjected. She’d worked as a bagger at a Safeway in high school. “But if he just started... Or maybe he’s a student?”

I shrugged. “No idea. I know nothing about him. See? Crazy.”

“So what’s the draw?”

“I don’t know.” I admitted, wishing I’d never said anything. “He just seems interesting.”

We were quiet for a moment. Then Dawn said, “you should ask him to go grab a coffee with you.”

“What?” I said, not because I hadn’t heard her, as Dawn well knew.

“Oh, come on. Grow a pair. How are you ever going to get to know him if you don’t ask him?”

I was hoping Jenny, old-fashioned as she was, might come to my rescue here, insisting that guys should do the asking out, but she stayed silent.

“Nah,” I said. “What if he isn’t interested?”

Dawn leveled her eyes at me. “Do you think he isn’t interested?”

“I have no idea,” I said. Sure, he flirted with me, but he could well flirt with all the girls. I imagined checking out pretty boring if you didn’t find a way to entertain yourself.

Dawn continued to look at me. “Fine,” she said. “Don’t ask him out then. Don’t do anything. Never get to know him any better. Your call.”

I didn’t reply to this. Jenny looked over at me, and I could see the concern in her face, her worry that Dawn and I were fighting. She still hadn’t quite figured out how our friendship worked. How brutal honesty was a show of love. An Idaho friendship. I understood: so many times in New Jersey, I would say the wrong thing or, more often, not say the right thing. My silence often misinterpreted as something it wasn’t (anger, guilt, apathy, whatever). It was like I didn’t understand the rules of speech anymore, and I realized that I was stuck in a cultural gap. The weird thing was, few of the people I worked and rode with had accents to speak of, so it was easy to forget how different we were. Most of the patients and some of the nurses had thick accents, but the doctors and receptionists tended to sound like any other television-variety American. But sounding alike didn’t mean we were alike, it just made it easier to forget we were different. Then someone would say something that I thought was cruel or rude or what have you, and everyone else would interpret the comment differently than I did. Or someone would say something that seemed perfectly reasonable or sweet, and the person at whom the comment

was aimed would get huffy, the surrounding nurses shooting daggers at the speaker with their eyes. I never got the hang of it, so I thought I would help Jenny now by showing her that I didn't take any offense at Dawn's words.

"See the problem is," I said, "what happens if I do ask him out, and we go out, and he turns out to be a total dork. Then, I've deprived myself of the lovely intrigue of being interested from afar."

"Yeah," said Dawn, "but if he is a dork, you're bound to find that out sooner or later anyway, and then you'll just be more irritated at yourself for having wasted so much time thinking he was probably cool."

Jenny still looked confused. "Do you really think he's a dork?"

I thought about this a minute before answering, mentally replaying our brief conversations, how sharp he was with a snappy reply. His eyes calm and steady behind his smile, watching me. Confident. Intelligent. Did I think he was a dork? "Yes, actually, I do." Foxy's back stretched and contracted as he stepped his long, ground-covering strides. My hips sunk and rose to his rhythm. "What worries me is that I think he's exactly my kind of dork, and those are hard to come by. I'd hate to find out I was wrong."

Jenny laughed at this. "I know what you mean," she said. We walked on, silent. I mulled over Dawn's advice: ask him to coffee. Here was Foxy, my reason (my excuse?) for never having made a move on any man. And then there was the trainwreck of my relationship with Dave, how disastrously I'd misread him. But the grocery store guy seemed removed from the universe in which Foxy and Dave operated on me with their very different loves. Liking him demanded nothing of me—as good a reason as any to never ask him out. Knowing him better could ruin everything.

After we got back from the ride and had the horses groomed, I grabbed a manure fork from the barn and the plastic totes out of my truck bed out to the fields where poop was rotting in the sun. The girls offered to help, but I waved them off, not out of charity but out of selfishness. In truth, I loved doing this work. I loved the way the muscles of my shoulders and back felt, flexing under my shirt as I lifted each pile and dumped it into my bucket. I loved knowing that nothing was wasted, that the horses helped nourish me in body as well as in mind and soul. Black gold, my mother called her compost, ever-conscious of oil, the other black gold for which men fought and died, the other way to get your food: shipped across the country in gas-guzzling trucks. Soldier Bill grazed not ten yards away; his namesake buried in Arlington. Everything seemed connected. My poop-harvest today would feed my mother's compost, helping the leaves and vegetable refuse break down into something rich and crumbly and fine.

*

Having no other plans for Sunday other than a long run and taking another crack at trying to discover the checker's name, I spent Saturday night at my parents. I took my run on the gravel roads in the cool morning of the mountain. Afterwards, I polished off a stack of waffles with homemade raspberry syrup, and helped tend my mother's garden, taking breaks from mulching to throw pine cones for Pilate to fetch. Not being a retriever, he usually just chased them down and chewed each to bits, shaking the fragments from his teeth as he broke them from the cone. The morning was hot and dry, and I was salty with dried sweat by the time I headed home, but thoroughly relaxed. I thought I would just kick back for the rest of the afternoon: watch some TV or maybe read a book, if I could find one. But once I showered, I found myself restless. Everything on television was stupid. I couldn't sit still to flip through a magazine, much less read a book.

A long slow walk, a ramble, was what I needed, so I decided to walk across town to Rosauers, even though I didn't really need anything. I took an empty backpack to carry things home. Some macaroni, I decided. I could make macaroni and cheese for dinner, and the leftovers would be fine for lunch next week.

Outside, the air held its warmth though a cool breeze breathed intermittently. Clouds lined the horizon, flanking the mountain: perhaps a little rain later on. The farmers wouldn't mind as long as it was just a little. There was still a little time before harvest. Too much rain would not be welcome. The wheat needed to dry, the fields free enough of mud to allow men to drive in the machines of harvest.

The rolling hills and black soils of the Palouse are not irrigated or irrigable. Farmers here still pray for rain or dry, depending on the season. Planting and harvest are an art, part meteorology, part experience, part luck. The land is generous, as is the scowling big sky. Most of the farmers here use shiny combines and drive new pickups. Before I moved, before New Jersey, before I saw people made rich by pharmaceuticals, chocolate, and bathing products, I once thought this was wealth.

I walked through the old part of Moscow, where a few Victorians still stood, painted their bold colors, gardens maintained. Amidst the Victorians, smaller homes had been built on the large, subdivided lots. Maples lined the streets, their leaves less green now but not yet yellow. Lanky kids with floppy hair took turns pushing their skateboards up to speed, jumping onto the curb, tumbling off, cursing, laughing, picking up the skateboards, repeating. An older couple cleared up from a yard sale, tarnished silver and a broken Remington still on the card table, tags hanging in the unmoving air.

Through this neighborhood and through the rim of broken down apartments that now separated the neighborhood from Main Street itself, across Main Street and into Rosauers, I walked. My checker-man was not working today. Instead, another new girl was working the express aisle (the line, a little longer than usual, suggested that she was still learning the ropes). I picked up macaroni noodles, some breadcrumbs, and headed for her line, using my time in line to think of a strategy for discovering the new guy's name.

I couldn't think of anything. The girl chattered nonstop to the lady in front of me then saw my noodles. "Mmmm, macaroni," she said, giggling. "My mom made the best mac and cheese. You're totally making me homesick. All I can make is Stouffers, which is ok, but it isn't Mom's, you know?" I nodded, trying to think of any possible way to turn the tide of this conversation my way, but the girl was already off again. "Real cheddar cheese, browned crust—are you putting breadcrumbs on top?" I nodded again, and opened my mouth to speak, though I had no words. It was too late; she'd rung me up already. "One dollar and seventy-two cents," she said, and turned to plop the dry noodles and bread crumbs into a plastic bag before I could say a word. I handed her two bucks and mumbled something about not needing the bag, holding up my backpack by way of explanation. "Whoops," she laughed and moved the groceries to my bag, then typing in the dollars. "Man," she continued, "I'm going to have to go get some mac and cheese for dinner now. I brought PB and J for break, but I don't think I can eat it now that I'm thinking of home."

I took my change and nodded thanks, stymied and wishing I chosen some other products to purchase, wishing more that I could have asked about the new guy instead of standing there slack-jawed and unspeaking.

*

The week began and I was no closer to knowing the man's name. At work, Cheryl focused her probing eye on other coworkers, having gotten no further gossip out of me. Monday was a busy morning. Patients who needed pre-op x-rays, guts barium-whitened on my film; a hung-over city worker who slipped off his pothole ladder's metal rung and broke his ankle; a man with a bagel knife to its hilt in his thigh, stabbed by his jealous wife; a toddler who tried to swallow his brother's matchbox car and had it lodged in his mouth. The list went on, a constant flow of work that made the early hours pass quickly.

And just when I thought I'd seen it all, Dave walked into the dim of my room, clearly healthy and clearly upset. Weary and short-tempered, I stared at him for a moment, trying to think of any conceivable reason to explain his presence. It was against policy for friends and family to come back here, especially on such a busy morning. For a moment, I thought that perhaps something had happened to Jenny, and I softened a bit, but then he gathered himself and spoke: "Jenny told me about your new man."

"What new man?" My voice, low as a growl. Outside the door, I caught the glimpse of a shadow and knew, instantly, that the shadow was Cheryl's and that she had allowed him back here. I couldn't talk about Jenny now. I couldn't be frank with him with Cheryl's listening ear so close and expectant. "You can't be here." I said. "You need to leave."

"I'll leave Jenny," his voice broke.

"You will do nothing of the kind," I said. My hands squeezed into fists and released, then squeezed again. This was crazy. "And I can not talk to you—not here, not now. Maybe not ever." With that, I'd misstepped. He sank down to a crouch, leaning his head into his hands. I looked at him down there: the shag of his hair shading his face, the waxed linoleum of the floor reflecting the room's dim light below his jean-covered thighs. "Listen," I said, my voice hard

with urgency, “this is a hospital. People are sick, and they need x-rays. You have to get out of here, and you have to get out now.”

But Dave was too involved in his own personal misery to care about anyone else’s. I stared at him, trying to think of how to get him out without calling security (Cheryl would love that) and despairing that I could not. And even if I could get him out of this room, how could I remove him from my life? What kind of insanity was this? Why had he come here? What did he think we had, and how could I convince him that I wasn’t the wonder woman he had made me to be in his mind? I wanted to put him on the table, to shoot pictures of his insides, to see what made him tick, but those things don’t show on film.

“Dave,” I said, kneeling next to him. Desperate to try anything to get rid of him, I laid my hand on his shoulder. My voice softened. I faked the part of the good friend, loving and concerned. “Dave, I don’t even know his name yet. It’s just some guy I mentioned because I thought he was cute, but that’s it. We can talk about this, but not here and not now. I have patients to see.”

He wiped at his eyes with the back of his arm.

I tried again, “Will you go now? Can we talk about this later?”

He nodded his head but didn’t look at me. “God,” he said, “you must think I am a total psycho.”

I knew I couldn’t lie convincingly, so I didn’t answer. I just patted him on the back as he walked out, saying again that we would talk later and trying to think how I could avoid that promised conversation.

“When do you get off?” he asked, and, when I told him, “I’ll be here then.”

“Not here,” I said. “Wait outside.”

“We’ll talk,” he said, and then he walked down the hall.

At the radiography reception desk, Cheryl smiled and pretended to type. I looked at the momentarily empty waiting room and returned to my room, glad for a moment that I was alone there.

Twenty minutes later, I was again in the hallway, helping a fifth grader back into his wheel chair when Dr. Rivers came fuming down the hall. “I need a word with you, Joan,” he announced for all to hear.

“Yes?” I said, not yielding my ground.

He closed in on me, coming up to the doorway where I stood, half of me in darkness, half of me in light. The child’s mother and child left and the main door clicked shut. “I understand you had a personal visitor here this morning.” Dr. Rivers wasn’t my supervisor, but he often took it upon himself to do her job, as if he needed to do all jobs at the hospital himself to make sure things went the way he felt they should.

“It was certainly not my intention to have any visitors,” I said, looking over to where Cheryl sat, turned away from us but listening, always listening. “Someone let him in.” I stared hard at the back of her hair, its upward sweep spray-stiffened.

Dr. Rivers ignored this comment. “You know that this area is for patients only. People come in here in critical conditions, and we must be ready to serve them as best we can.”

I’d been serving those patients all morning, I’d been serving them for years now, but I didn’t say anything. The gold clip of the Mount Blanc pen clipped to his white pocket flashed under the florescence like the shining saber of his self-righteousness. I knew I should tell him to mind his own business, but another part of me felt I deserved this. Dave was my fault, my mistake.

“Frankly,” he continued, “I am beginning to wonder if your personal life is affecting the quality of your work.”

I locked my eyes on his. “What.” My voice dead and level. I wondered how much Cheryl had overheard, how much she told him, how much she had invented.

“Moving one place then another, mind always elsewhere. You seem distracted.”

“And you think it’s affecting my work?”

“I am wondering if it might.”

I knew I would have to take some flack for Dave’s presence, and I was willing to take it, but I would hear nothing against my radiographs. My pictures were as good as anyone’s. He knew it, and I knew it. “This is horse shit.” I said. I heard a gasp from the reception desk, but didn’t bother to look over there.

Dr. Rivers’s lips curled into a sneer. “I hope you don’t use that kind of language around our patients.”

“And I hope you don’t reprimand all hospital professionals in public,” I returned, quivering with rage.

Dr. Rivers’s cheeks burned red, a stark contrast to the prematurely grey, gel-slick hair at his temples.

My voice low and seething, I continued, “My radiographs are good, better than most, and you know it. I do not invite personal acquaintances back here, and today’s was particularly unwelcome, as I made clear to him. I asked him to leave, and he did. I hope the visit will not be repeated. If he does try to come back here again, I hope someone” (flicking my eyes towards Cheryl) “will do her job and call security.”

Dr. Rivers nodded. “As long as we’re on the same page,” he said.

I nodded. “I believe we are,” I said.

He put his hand on my back and we turned into the darkness of the x-ray room, leaving the door partially ajar. “I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you privately,” he said. “I should have.”

I shrugged. His eyes seemed sincere, and as I looked at him now, it struck me again how young he still was. A little too young for the position he held. Young and liable to make mistakes, like we all made mistakes. My anger gave a little. “I may have been a little overly sensitive.” I conceded. “It has not been an easy day.”

“Yes,” he said, “not for any of us.” He turned and left before I could ask him what he meant by that. As I closed the door to radiography, I heard him asking Cheryl if she would have a word with him in private. It did not escape me that Dr. Rivers chastised me in public but apologized in private, and the sting of the insult to my work remained, apology or no.

This anger was not allayed when I walked out of the hospital later to find Dave sitting on the folded-down tailgate of my truck, making himself right at home. He shone in the late afternoon sun like some golden god. I was having none of it. Seeing me, he smiled sheepishly—a smile I imagined had won Jenny back after many a fight.

I prepared myself for a showdown. Twenty paces away, I stopped and squared. I felt my weight like sand running through my hourglass of body, settling into my feet—it was a visualization I knew from riding: how to balance myself so that I would be ready to ride out any move that was coming. “You need to get off my truck,” I said.

Dave’s face fell. I imagined I saw dust swirl between us; I imagined it was not just after three but rather high noon. I waited for his shot.

He responded with confusion. “I thought we were going to talk—to work things out.”

My feet, still firm on the ground. “I’m going to tell you how things are,” I said. “This is where I work. It is a hospital. People come in sick and dying and they need me, and you will not come here again unless you’re laid out on a gurney. If you come in again like you came today, I will call security and let them toss you on your ass. Are we clear?”

He didn’t answer. He only stared at me as if I were a foreign body.

“When you see me,” I continued, “it will be because you are with Jenny, who is my friend. Who is your wife.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this.” His face seemed paler now, in spite of the warm glow of the sun. Then, he parried, voice soft but insistent, “I told you, I’d leave her.”

“Maybe you should.” I walked towards my truck, nodding him off the tailgate. “Maybe that would be best for both of you. But understand this: if you leave her, it will not be for me. That’s not an option now. It never really was.” I slammed the gate shut.

He didn’t look at me now. His eyes were off on a distant horizon. “I can’t believe you’re saying this.”

“Well, you don’t know me very well.” I wanted that thought to sink in. I wanted that to be the shot to the heart that finished all this.

“I know you well enough,” he said.

“You don’t know me at all.”

He turned and looked at me, his cheek inches from my cheek. His face wasn’t pale now but dark, a darkness heightened by his ice-clear eyes. From his stare, I knew I had failed. My shot had sailed wide of its mark—his heart was still beating. After all I’d said, he still thought himself in love with me. His eyes narrowed and he looked at me, right into my eyes. A challenge. And, God damn it, I looked away. I got into the driver’s seat, I backed out of the lot,

but nothing could change the fact that I'd looked away first. Nothing could erase the flames I saw in the black of his dilating pupils.

CHAPTER 3

DETERMINING THE LINE

Think only of the jump, I implored her, as if I had put the whole of my money on her back; and she went over it like a bird. But there was another fence beyond that and a fence beyond that.
-Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 94

I skipped going to the barn that afternoon, though it would probably have done me good. I didn't want to risk running into Jenny, if she was still there. And I didn't know if I could take seeing Foxy today, seeing, again, his degeneration, seeing no hope in sight.

Years ago, I broke my collarbone coming off him. He'd stopped on course at a cross-country event and I'd flown headlong into a solid log vertical. It was the only event we ever did—a little two-day on the other side of Deary, Idaho. To this day, I don't know what stopped him. He'd been jumping enthusiastically, as usual, and had just come through the water obstacle, the only obstacle I'd been worried about. We were drenched from the splash of our victory there, the water running down my boots. Fox hadn't even thought about stopping. I was flushed with the thrill of it, and I must have taken a bit of leg off because there, at the next fence (a straight forward vertical like we'd jumped a million times), I found myself flying without him. Perhaps the shadows had shifted, perhaps it was the rounded bulk of the logs, but Foxy had put on the brakes, folding his haunches underneath himself in a magnificent sliding stop, raising clouds of dry forest loam that would settle on me where I fell.

The judge, a Pony Club kid's mom who looked like she barely knew which end of the horse was which, ran to catch Foxy and radio for help, stopping the riders on course behind me.

The pain of the break was so overwhelming that, at first, I felt nothing. My senses shut down. My mind seemed to fill with the dust floating around me. All I could hear was sliding hooves, long after the slide had stopped. It was like listening to the world in a sea shell; mainly, what I heard was my own private tide. When the sounds of the world filtered in again, so did the pain, lapping over me in waves, pulling me under from somewhere deep. By the time help arrived, I was only able to say through gritted teeth that I had broken my clavicle. I'd only just started my anatomy coursework, but of that, I was certain.

Now, faced with the problems at work and at home, I thought of that break. The pain of losing Foxy was oddly similar to the pain of a fracture: it was an internal hurt, inexplicable to those in the smooth-functioning, external world; then as now, I knew exactly what was happening, yet I couldn't fix it; and even the way shock worked: as with that break, the mind's clouds rolled in and then away, first letting me deny that he was breaking down only to leave me awash in the terrible realization.

Back on that now distant day, a patient in what would become my ER, bandaged and taped back into place, I'd asked the doctor how long it would be until I could ride again. The doctor had laughed at me: What kind of freak wants to ride right after wrecking herself?

What was I doing back in Idaho, and where else could I go? I felt that laughter in the air now, though it had no source. The ubiquitous scorn, the derision, the comeuppance served to a girl who thought she was too good for her home. Dave, Dave.

I couldn't see Foxfire that day. I couldn't have those thoughts weighing on top of everything else; my escape route, the barn—my place of solace in stress, blocked from me. The barn was infected with Dave. Jenny, his vector: I couldn't go there today and risk facing her. Instead, I went to the store and bought a frozen noodle bowl and some milk. The new guy was

back in the express lane. For once, I didn't think about learning his name. That day, I couldn't care, not with so much else to care about.

"You don't look like your usual cheery self," he said.

"Shows, huh?" (Silence and the beep of the scanner.) "Bad day at work."

"Ok," he said, clearly at a loss to say anything else. My mood wrecked my ability to banter. No smiles now.

I sighed. "Maybe I'll tell you about it over coffee sometime." The words were out of my mouth before I even realized fully what I was saying. Everything else had gone wrong that day, why not add rejection to the list? I stared at him, challenging him, daring him to turn me down and add one more irritation to my stockpile.

But "OK," he'd said, looking slightly stunned. "That would be great."

He rang up the milk and gave me the total. "My name's Timothy, by the way," he said. "Timothy like the grass, not Tim."

"OK, Timothy-like-the-grass."

"And you're Joan."

"Who told?" I leaned over the plastic check-writing station, scrutinizing him.

Now, he smiled, that whole-face smile that he shared with Clint: the all-conquering smile one had to return. A smile I'd won from him. "I'll never reveal my source," he said.

I scribbled my name and phone number on the back of the receipt. "Just call whenever you want that coffee."

He folded the paper carefully and put it in his shirt pocket, his movements methodical and thoughtful. "How about tomorrow?" he said. I smiled, glad he acted in the moment rather than waiting to call. We arranged to meet at seven, after his shift ended.

*

And so it was that I found myself in the coffee shop alone the next day, waiting for him to show, over a strong black coffee, no frills, not even sugar or cream. I wanted coffee pure and unadulterated. I'd arrived early and bought my own cup, determined to be the one who set the rules.

The rain that the clouds had promised the other night was still falling, and several farmers sat in the corner, tipping latté to mouth under the sweat-blackened brims of old caps: John Deere, MacGregor, Caterpillar. Through the plate glass windows, I watched a small pickup truck in the parking lot, several box-shaped things in the back giving form to their blue tarpaulin cover. The pickup of a student moving in, surely. Perhaps an old dresser in the back. Some cardboard boxes.

A young guy walked out towards the truck, steaming paper cup in hand, and climbed in, seemingly ambivalent to the rain pelting his coat, and I found myself suddenly nostalgic. Mostly, I had hated moving. I hated packing, hated unpacking, hated finding apartments, hated final inspections. But the move itself—everything you care about (not everyone, but every thing) in the back of your truck, everything you don't care about, disposed of. The feeling of freedom in that moment: you could go to your new place or you could go anywhere. The Chevy's dual fuel tanks both full, and nothing but potential. No stress to carry—the old place fading and the new one yet to be. I half-wondered if I should go now. I wondered if I was starting off with Timothy on a bad note, Timothy-like-the-grass in the middle of my jinxed life and all this rain.

But then, in he walked, the rain running off his jacket as if nothing could get to him. He pulled back his dripping hood, saw me, smiled, and walked over.

“You ordered without me?”

I smiled and shrugged.

He set down a soaked canvas backpack and went for his own coffee.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked when he returned.

“My deepest, darkest secrets,” he said.

“Ah,” I nodded knowingly. “Mystery man, eh?”

“Of course.” He settled back in his chair and looked me dead in the eye. “So let’s hear about this bad day of yours.”

“I’m supposed to spill my guts, and you won’t even say what’s in your backpack?” I cocked an eyebrow, and glanced at the pack. “I don’t think so.”

“OK, OK. Man, you play hardball.” He unbuckled the flap and pulled it back to reveal textbooks.

“Ahhh, a student.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“I figured as much.” And I have to admit I was relieved that he had aspirations beyond ringing up groceries, though I didn’t say so much to him. “Is that a Geology book? You’re not taking rocks for jocks, are you?”

“Hey now, I need a science credit—and why not geology? It’s pretty interesting stuff.”

I wouldn’t know. My only experience with core classes was watching my roommates blow off studying for them while I pored over the anatomy and physiology texts for my radiography certification.

“Your turn,” he said to me, after buckling up his bag. “Spill.”

I took a sip of my coffee, savoring its dark bitterness while I tried to figure out where to begin. How could I tell this story without making him think less of me? This guy picked me up at a bar, I slept with him, he turned out to be 1) my friend's husband and 2) psychotic. It wasn't a story designed to make me look good.

Instead, I told him about Foxfire. "I have a horse," I said. I watched for a reaction, a trace of an aversion, but didn't get one. I realized that he'd seen me in my riding gear often; I was telling him nothing new. "Foxfire—that's my horse. He's getting older now. We used to jump. You ever ride?"

"Just around the backyard at a friend's house, but that was grade school."

"Well, when you jump, it's the best." I felt foolish, trying to explain it: the feeling for which there are no words, the reason I loved my sport, but Timothy wasn't looking at me like I was a fool. His eyes held mine. He was interested—or looked interested—in what I had to say. "I don't know anything like it. You fly for brief moments, and even after you land, that feeling of flight stays with you. You can carry it for hours, sometimes days."

Timothy listened to all of this with no show of surprise or disgust. Passing the test: not turned off by a girl who never outgrew her preteen love affair with horses.

"Anyway," I continued. "Foxy's getting old now. He can't jump anymore. It used to be that I'd have a bad day, and I had somewhere to go. I could ride Foxy and he'd always make me feel better. Now, I can't do that, so I have a bad day at work, and there's nothing to do about it."

"Where do you work?"

"The hospital. I take x-rays."

He looked at me; the gold of his brown eyes seem to shift even as his gaze held steady.

"You must see some pretty gruesome stuff."

“Mostly, it’s just pre-op: nothing too gory. Just folks in bad moods after having to drink a quart of barium or whatever. But sometimes, you just want to not have to think about it, you know? Sometimes you just want not to have to think, period.”

A moment of silence, and I decided to come clean—all the way clean—about my love of riding and how much it meant. “The other thing is, I’ve always ridden competitively. I spent the last few years in New Jersey training with the Olympic coach.”

Timothy’s eyebrows raised. “You were going to ride for the US Team?”

“No. Well, maybe. If I’d had another horse, maybe I would have had a shot at something like that, but Foxy was already slowing down too much. I can’t afford the type of horse that can jump the big stuff, so mainly, I just feel stupid. Like I wasted all that time. Now, I’m back home with nothing to show for it.”

Timothy shrugged. “It’s no different from me, really. Well, what you were doing is a lot bigger than me going to college, but no one at home thinks me being here is a good idea. I can hear them now: *you think anyone’s going to hire a half-breed for any decent job?*” He sipped his coffee, and I waited for him to finish. “They’re probably right. I mean, the education I got on the Res didn’t exactly prepare me for the University. I’ve been playing catch-up since I got here, and for what? It’s not practical that I’m here, but I came anyway, and I’m going to stick it out. Even if I don’t get a job, at least I’ll have an education.”

He didn’t look at me as he told me this. It reminded me of Dave: this love of school, except more tenacious, more fierce. I didn’t think Timothy would give up school for a girl. I liked that. I recognized it: I wasn’t going to stop riding for any man, and I didn’t want a man who’d give up his goals for me, either. Even if it was a dream that was stupid. Especially if.

And then (I don't remember how I even got on the subject) I told him about Jennifer—not Dave's Jenny, but my friend Jennifer from high school. I guess it was the subject of loss, of death, of things you can't get back that made me think of her. Or maybe just how smart she'd been, and how driven. I talked about the conversations we used to have, and how they drove our other friends crazy. "We never finished a sentence when we were talking to each other. I would start to say something, and before I finished, Jennifer would know what I was going to say and would have replied, and I'd do the same. The weird thing was, I never noticed that I hadn't finished saying what I had to say, and we never felt like we talked over each other or cut one another off. That was just how we talked."

Timothy nodded. "My brother and I used to be like that."

"Used to?"

"He moved to Chicago, got a job; now, when he comes home, it's different. There's a space that didn't used to be there. It's cool—we still get along well and all that, and everyone has to grow up. I hadn't thought about it in a while, but when he first left, I remember feeling that something was lost."

"I lost Jennifer even before she died," I admitted. "We had this argument over her asshole boyfriend—more than one argument, actually. I couldn't keep my mouth shut. I knew it wasn't my business," I said. "It was her choice who she dated. But he was such a jerk, and I couldn't understand why she didn't see it. And then, when she died, it seemed like it was my fault because I couldn't make her stop dating him."

"What happened?"

"Car wreck—he was driving. They were coming home from a kegger. Typical story. But she should have never been in the car—I don't know what she saw in him. I had tried so

hard to make her see what a jerk he was, but when we argued, she just clung to him that much tighter. Maybe, if I'd just shut up, she would have seen him for what he was. If I had been there for her, instead of picking on her boyfriend, maybe she wouldn't have felt all alone. Maybe that would have given her the strength to leave."

"Maybe," Timothy pushed his cup in circles on the table, swirling the last of the coffee around its paper sides. "But maybe not. Sometimes things just happen, and there's nothing you can do."

I suddenly felt self-conscious. I wasn't sure where all these confessions had come from, or why I had felt the need to burden him with my stories. I'd avoided the subject of Dave, but who talked like this to a stranger? I must have looked just as bad as I would have if I'd told him my more current troubles.

But Timothy just smiled his easy smile and gazed on me with his quiet eyes, and I couldn't detect a hint of judgment.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't usually go on like that. You must think I'm some kind of nut job."

He laughed. "No, I don't think that. Actually, I was thinking it was nice to have a real conversation with someone for once."

"As opposed to a fake conversation?" I watched his face. I wanted to press my cheek to his, to feel the heat of his skin against my own.

"As opposed to a plastic conversation: pleasantries, the weather, television, the usual subjects."

"Yeah. But honesty doesn't usually get you anywhere, does it?"

He thought about this for a moment, finishing off his cup of coffee. “Depends on where you want to go.” He stacked his paper coffee cup in mine. “Now, me? I could go for a movie right now. You game?”

I smiled back at him. “What’s playing?”

*

Later, I dropped Timothy and his battered ten-speed off at his apartment and drove home from the movie with the kernels of our shared bucket of popcorn pleasantly lodged in my teeth. Happy—in spite of the fact that everything wrong in my life was still wrong, in spite of the fact that there had been no kiss, that we’d hung out platonically, that, for all I knew, he might not be interested in anything more. I wasn’t an “experienced” girl. I didn’t really know how romance worked, but he never made a move, never got close the way Dave had. Still, it was the start of something—friendship or love. I told myself it didn’t matter which. The night air was such a perfect temperature that I was tempted to go for a walk, but the hour was late, and I had work in the morning.

Inside my apartment, the red light of my answering machine blinked. I passed by it at first, barely registering the light, walking back to my bedroom to put on my PJs before I bothered with who called. But, as I changed, I started to wonder who it was. I ran through the list of possibilities: wouldn’t be Dawn, wouldn’t be my parents unless one was in the hospital, wouldn’t be Timothy because I’d only just dropped him off.

But it could be Dave. What if he’d seen me out with Timothy? He was already crazy enough after hearing that I was interested in someone else. I could only imagine his reaction to an actual date, or what looked like one.

Now unnerved, I pulled on my cutoff sweatpants and an old Fruit of the Loom v-neck undershirt (the kind that come in three packs, the kind marketed to old men, the kind I have a drawer full of). I approached the machine, trying to believe it was any one else on the machine. I twisted my hair up, off my hot neck. I couldn't think of anyone else who would call me. No one had called in months. The blinking light offered nothing, no hint of the contents of the message it held. I pressed the button quickly, darting my hand out and back as if I were handling something poisonous.

It was Eddie's voice on the tape, not Dave's. I let out a long deep breath. He'd been back for a week, and he apologized for not calling sooner—things were crazy, what with moving. He thought he'd see what I was up to and if I was interested in doing some riding.

"Hell yes, I'm interested," I said to his recorded voice. Eddie was a drill sergeant at flat work, with a meticulous eye for detail and a demand for perfection. He would see Foxfire and me, and he would know right away that we'd been slacking off. He would have none of it. There was no way to hide sloppiness from him, and no way to fake work that hadn't been done, muscles that hadn't been developed or maintained.

The thought made me giddy. Finally, I had a reason to go to the barn again, to *work*, even if Foxy and I couldn't jump.

It was too late to call Eddie that night and set up a lesson, and I wouldn't have time to call before work. I was silly with excitement. I wanted to call Timothy (but didn't on the grounds that he would think I had totally lost my mind). I wanted to call Dawn (even though—or maybe because—she hated Eddie). I wanted to call my parents (early risers who'd be in bed by now). I wanted to call anyone who could share my joy, but there was no one. No one I knew would understand why I was this happy.

I was wired on caffeine, adrenaline, and senseless euphoria. I didn't sleep until it was early morning, yet I jumped out of bed when the radio clicked on as if I'd slept for hours. I went running (legs charged with the energy of Eddie's return), showered, pulled on scrubs, brewed more coffee. I sang songs about how I loved coffee. I sang about how I loved Foxfire. I sang about how Cheryl sucked and what she and Dr. Rivers could do with themselves. I hoped the walls of my apartment building weren't too thin.

That afternoon, I would call Eddie and set up a lesson schedule. And then, I would ride. I would ride like I used to. I would ride like I meant it.

*

Cheryl eyeballed me suspiciously all morning, and I realized that I hadn't smiled so much at work since I'd moved back. I relished her discomfort and the ignorance that caused it. I laughed openly and often at small jokes and petty annoyances. The copier's chronically low toner: hilarious. The grumpy old farmer coddling his broken arm: charming. Even the way things went wrong was right, was expected, was Home.

I called Eddie from work, his "hello" as warm and comforting as the smell of the pipe smoke that clung to his clothing. "I want the very first lesson you've got," I told him, and arranged to meet on a Thursday.

Cheryl, her back towards me, typed. The tilt of her head, dour and disapproving: my unabashedly personal call.

I told Eddie that Foxfire wasn't jumping any more, so it would have to be only flatwork for now. His *hmm* offered neither sympathy nor surprise. "I picked up a new mare in California that might suit you," he said. "For the time being, anyway. She's a bit rough yet; I'd been planning on working with her for a while myself, but with trying to get the boys to school and

soccer, I'm not sure when I'll have time." He was silent for a moment, thinking. I didn't interrupt. "I'll tell you what. I'll bring her, and you can have a lesson on her, then tell me what you think."

"That sounds great."

I hung up. Cheryl didn't turn to look at me. She hadn't been speaking to me since getting chewed out for allowing Dave back into the radiography. I offered her my brightest, most triumphant smile. I didn't miss her conversation.

*

I stopped by Rosauers for groceries on the way home that night, as usual. My basket: a ham steak to dice, a bunch of spring onions, eggs, peas. Timothy smirked at me when I came to the checkout. "Man, haven't you had enough of me, yet?"

"That's a charming greeting." I smiled back and laid my shopping on the black belt rolling towards him.

"I'm a charming guy."

I was glad for the return to this light banter, half-afraid that yesterday's conversation (confessions) would create an embarrassed distance between us now that the moment was over.

He looked at my groceries, then at me as he began to scan them. "What are you making?"

"Fried rice." I paused, then realized this was an opportunity. "Why?" I said, "you want some?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I hadn't meant to beg an invitation. I don't get off until seven again."

“That’s fine. I’m not cooking until after I ride. My place at 7:30, then?” I looked at the total on the screen and handed him a ten.

“Beats the hell out of frozen burritos.”

“You bet your ass it does.” I took the change he offered.

“I can’t, though.” I looked at him for explanation. He dropped his eyes. “I’ve got an essay due tomorrow.”

The words were on my tongue, but I didn’t say them: I didn’t tell him to blow it off, or that he’d have to eat sometime, or anything else. I wouldn’t beg. I bit them back. “Another time, then,” was all I said.

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be.”

“I’d much rather be eating with you than writing this essay.”

I smiled. “Now there’s high praise,” keeping the sarcasm light and playful, though I half-wanted it to sting. I turned away. Maybe I turned so that I didn’t hold up the line. Maybe so he wouldn’t see my disappointment. I vowed again, though, that I wouldn’t push it. With lessons starting again and the possibilities promised by a new horse to ride (maybe show!), perhaps it would be better if nothing happened anyway. That’s what I tried to make myself believe. But another part of me was imagining swinging down from the saddle to a flannelled arm around my shoulder, a congratulatory kiss on the cheek, after winning another class. The only thing better than winning a blue ribbon was someone watching me win a blue ribbon, someone being happy I’d won it. Not just Eddie, or Dawn, but someone who cared nothing about horses or good riding. Someone who only cared because it was me in the saddle.

Dave, I thought. Remember Dave. Don’t rush this.

*

I arrived at the barn twenty minutes early on Thursday, but Eddie's battered blue Ford was already in the parking lot, the rusty door of his mismatched stock trailer left open and swinging in the late summer breeze. I walked over to latch it. Fresh scratches marred the paint, the glare of their silver in relief against the rust. Odd: the open door. An unusual oversight.

As I approached the barn doors, I heard Eddie's voice. "Sit back, back." He said, the words slow and tone decisive. Another lesson—someone else ahead of me. (Son of a bitch.)

My eyes took a second to adjust to the darkness of the barn after the bright afternoon sun. "A little leg," Eddie said.

"I don't think I've got any leg left." Jenny's voice. I watched Eddie watching her from the middle of the arena as she circled around him.

"Come on. No rest for the wicked." (How many times he'd said the same to me.)

Zip was moving better than I'd seen him move since coming back: his hind legs beginning to stretch forward, almost tracking up. Jenny gave him more leg, and it all came together. His hind feet filling the hoof prints left by the front, Zip was moving like a dressage horse.

"There it is," Eddie said. "Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?" said Jenny, laughing. "I feel like we're trotting a million miles an hour—is that what I'm supposed to feel?"

"Fast, yes, but not quick. You're moving because he's engaging behind and pushing off like he should, instead of offering that little pony trot he was doing before. Nice long strides."

Jenny beamed, and, glad for her small victory, I felt my slight jealousy ebb. I stayed at the rail and watched the rest of her lesson, but it was mainly downhill from that moment.

Jenny's leg began to flop more as she fatigued, and she was often just out of balance, sitting a little too forward or a little too back. Finally Eddie said, "That's enough for now." As Jenny walked Zip on a long rein, Eddie gave her her homework: more work on transitions, lots of circles, lots of bending.

"When do I get to jump?" Jenny asked.

"Your leg is looser than I'd like it, and you are struggling with balance, but we'll get there. Just keep working." I smiled, thinking of how Dawn had responded to a similar lesson years ago, her livid expression. "You want thirty bucks for that?" Dawn had said. "For running me in circles and telling me to keep my leg on?" Eddie had only shrugged.

Now, he turned to me. "Well, hey there, stranger," he said.

"Hey back." Hearing my voice, Foxfire nickered from his stall at the end of the aisle and pressed his velvety nose through the bars.

"Good to see you, safe and sound. You learn anything new in New Jersey?"

I shrugged. "Learned I couldn't afford the horse board there and that it pays to be rich."

"No bitterness, now. That'll get you nowhere."

"Hey, I'm just answering your question. Jack Stewart helped me with my hands a bit, too."

"Good," he said. "They needed helping."

I didn't take offense. It was true—they'd never been bad, but I had a tendency to tense in my elbows and shoulders slightly, stiffening against the easy give and take of the bit as the horse moved. Decent hands, but not great.

Eddie looked me over, the skin around his eyes a little more wrinkled in spite of his ever-present ball cap. It was the same damned cap as when I'd left: a freebie that had come with a

grain purchase lord knows how many years ago. His tee shirt, too, looked familiar, though it was difficult to tell one faded Mariners shirt from another. Or perhaps it was the way his slight middle-aged-man paunch hung over his jeans that made all shirts look the same.

He smiled. "You look good. You've been keeping in shape."

"Trying to."

"Good. You may need all you've got today." (The new horse.)

"Lazy?" I asked.

Eddie laughed and held up his hands. "No. Not lazy. If anything, the reverse: she's extra-track with a bit of a mean streak."

I looked Eddie in the eye. "Define 'a bit.'"

He looked away, toward the open barn door, the light breeze gently rocking it back and forth in its tracks. "Well, maybe it's just better if you meet her."

"Shit."

Eddie laughed. "You might say that."

As we walked toward the door, I looked back towards Jenny, now grooming Zip in the last cross ties in the aisle, to see if she'd heard any of this conversation, but she brushed on, without looking up. "Where is she?" I asked Eddie.

"Out in the back pasture."

I saw the mare as we came around the side of the barn, her coat a dull, lackluster grey. She was thin: her ribs as pronounced as fence rails, her hips angular, no neck to speak of. Her un-muscled, un-fatted skeleton visible everywhere. "Jesus."

"Yeah." Eddie pulled at the graying hair that curled over his ear at the edge of his cap, something I'd often seen him do in tense moments: jump-offs, injuries. "I ran across her just as

we were packing for home. She lost weight being shipped, but she was already looking really rough. I think the previous owners tried to starve the spunk out of her.” He smiled, now, and his hand dropped. “It didn’t work.”

My sympathy for the mare was short lived. As we entered the pasture, she lunged at us with sudden fury, her teeth snapping. “Easy, girl,” I said. Eddie stopped and stood, and I did the same. We watched her as she put on her show. With a whole pasture to run in, she wasn’t running. She was stomping, rearing, tossing her head, and through it all, she was watching us.

A few steps in front, Eddie held his hand out sideways, two fingers raised, a signal for me to hang back, which I was more than willing to do. He continued to watch the mare, never taking his eyes off hers, as he approached. His slow, careful steps; his frequent pauses; the hot, dry air.

He stood at her shoulder for minutes before slipping his arms around her neck to catch her, the halter swinging under her throat. She was still, but her eye whitened, and, as he dropped the halter down to slip it over her nose, she wheeled to bite his arm. Eddie saw it coming and moved with her, always just in front of her teeth. When she stopped again, he slid the halter on.

“She’s a mare all right,” was all I said.

“An alpha mare,” Eddie handed me the lead rope.

“Fantastic.”

I walked her into the barn and cross-tied her quickly, my eyes never leaving her mouth. As I brushed her, she swung her body alternately away from me and then suddenly towards me, trying to pin me against a wall. When I approached to pick her feet, she cow-kicked at my head. “Quit,” I growled, my voice as low and deep as I could make it. Meanwhile, Foxy was growing more anxious. His welcoming nicker had changed to a more insistent whinny, and I could hear

the shuffle of his hooves as he paced the stall. I should have moved him—would have, had I realized how upset he'd be. I wished he'd stop a minute, just long enough for me to clear my head.

“Just go slow,” Eddie said.

She kicked again as I layered on the saddle pads (several, due to her thinness) and then my saddle, and kicked again when I passed the girth under her belly—this time her hoof clipped the side of my hand. I stifled a yelp and shook my hand as if the pain was a spider to be shaken off. Between her viciousness and Foxy's panic, my fuse was growing short. I shot a look at Eddie, but he just smiled and watched. I buckled the girth and took the bridle Eddie held out—a simple old hunting-style headstall with broad flat leather pieces long out of fashion in the show ring. He'd fitted it, I noticed, with fat loose-ring snaffle bit, a kind bit, a gentle bit.

The bird bones of my hand throbbed. I took a deep breath before unsnapping the crossties, trying to think how I could get the halter off and bridle on without being bitten. Foxy's incessant whinnying and pacing echoed in my bones, echoed through my brain pan: my head a ringing bell. My muscles were heavy and tense with the stress of it. Foxy the rock and this new horse the hard place. Like Dave and Timothy. Like Cheryl and Dr. Rivers. Like all the things I was trapped between, the bad known and the unreadable unknown. And how could I ever work with this thin mare who wanted so badly to hurt me? Why would I want to?

Vigilant, vigilant, I took the halter firm in hand and unsnapped the tie, but the mare was strong and the mare was quick. Her teeth locked like a vice on the denim of my jacket, clamping onto my skin underneath. A vicious pinch, which made me cry out in pain and rage. I tore my bruised arm from her teeth, wheeled, and punched her in the face. Hard. My knuckles burned with the violence of it. I barely had time to be shocked by my own action, my total loss of

control (I'd never hit a horse) when she turned to bite again. She lunged at me trying to find anything to hold. Not a flight animal, this one.

I staggered back and stood, inches from her teeth. The only thing between her and me: the band of nylon halter that held her in check. My mind spun. I fought to make sense of what had just happened—of what I had just done.

Eddie was at my shoulder. Deftly, he snagged her halter and held her head steady, stroking her neck. He didn't say a word. He just stood there and waited until she relaxed in his hand, her eyes still white at their edges and watching me. He slipped on the headstall and handed me the reins. I couldn't look him in the eye. "That won't happen again," I mumbled.

He said nothing, but he didn't have to. Loathing welled in me. What kind of a person hit an animal? I led the mare into the arena and hand-walked her once around the perimeter, acquainting her with its mirrors and dark corners. She spooked at nothing.

From the corner stall, Foxfire continued to shuffle and scream. I mounted quickly, the mare trying to run out from the pressure of my body. I pulled the reins hard against her mouth to slow her canter, but she simply threw her head back in the air and ran: a hollow-backed, wild gallop. I worked the reins: pressure, release, pressure, but no effect. I found the second stirrup with my dangling foot and pulled her head left into a tight circle until she slowed and, finally, stopped.

"She's a little sensitive," Eddie said.

"A track horse with track manners."

"But not so skittish as your typical track horse. She's not even listening to Foxy down there."

“Should we move him?” Foxfire began to knock his hooves against the stall, pawing to come out. Guilt in the air like dust: fine and ubiquitous.

“Leave him for now. Next time, we’ll move him.”

Next time.

The lesson continued as it started: ugly. Jenny watched from the rail for a while after putting Zip away, but when the mare took a swipe at her, she waved and took off. How her image of me must have shifted: no longer the riding expert on the fine horse but an apprentice fighting for even a modicum of control. Eddie kept telling me to “relax, relax.” Too much tension in my elbows and shoulders, he said. “Where are those good hands I heard about?” Meanwhile, the mare held her head high and back, evading any contact with the bit. Eddie dragged out poles for her to trot, but she jumped them. At each, she relaxed for the moment before and during the jump, stretched round and forward, then immediately threw her head high again, tossing it against the bit, trying to pull the reins from my hands. So many vices, and only those brief moments of relaxation, so quick they almost seemed imagined. Still, it was a glimmer, a promise.

It was a short lesson—she didn’t have stamina for anything more, despite all her bravado. When I dismounted, she ran out from under me and wrenched the foot still in the stirrup. The reins chafed my hand, leaving an angry red stripe across my palm that seemed to resonate against the hoof bruise on the back of my left hand.

“Well, what do you think?” Eddie watched me with his ever-appraising eyes.

“You don’t want to know.”

“You could learn a lot from this horse.” He stroked her under-muscled neck. “You’ve been spoiled by Foxy, and you know it. You won’t luck into another one like him.”

I looked at Eddie more closely: the battered cap, those quick, shaded eyes. “Are you trying to sell me this animal?”

“No. No.” He laughed and raised his hands wide, stopping that thought as he would have stopped a loose horse. “I’m suggesting that I could give you free lessons on her if you’d be willing to put in some time. Say, three days a week training her? She’ll be here for winter anyway—I’ve already cleared that with Connie.”

I snorted. “Connie know about her manners?”

“Connie’s met her. She wasn’t thrilled, but she’ll put the mare in the back pasture. I need an indoor to get her in shape.”

“You’ll be working with her, too?”

“The other three days of the week. Lesson day, we both work with her, you in the saddle and me down here.”

“I don’t know.” Her head hung in the crossties, finally showing evidence of exhaustion. Pitiful, the flop of her ears.

“We have to go slow with her, but I think we could have her ready to show in spring—low level stuff, at least.”

The promise of horse shows. I moved toward her a step, and her head jerked to attention, her eye whitening again. Foxy continued screaming.

“Give me some time to think about it.”

“Call me this weekend, and let me know.”

“What are my options? What other lesson horses do you have right now?”

“Everything else I’ve got is leased out.”

“I thought that was just for summer.”

“I extended them. If things continue well for the next month, Pam’s going to buy Winston. Hansel’s with a kid in Walla Walla, but he doesn’t jump anything over three feet anymore. He’d be no good for you even if he was available.”

“So, it’s this mare or flatwork on Foxy.”

“Unless you can borrow something else. And you know your flatwork—you need a jumper.”

“Shit.” I began brushing the horse. “She have a name yet?”

“Her registered name is Luckstar’s Last Zephyr.”

“Oh God.”

“I know. Someone got a little too creative. She’s out of Luckstar by Mesrour—decent lines with proven Thoroughbred jumping blood, but her owners must have been Quarter Horse people to come up with that mouthful of name.” I knew nothing of bloodlines or naming conventions, and could offer no comment. Eddie took a soft brush and began to brush her face, tightly holding the halter as he did so. “I’ve been calling her Zephie for now.”

Zephie, as if removing the r could remove her bite. I picked out her last hoof and set it down. I was just straightening again when she kicked, catching me squarely on the thigh. *Deserved*, I thought, still guilty from throwing the punch. We were even now. She’d gotten a good blow this time, though I was close enough that she couldn’t quite get her full strength into it, which possibly saved me a broken bone. The bruise from her kick would darken over the next day to a blue-purple U, like something mimeographed, like I had been branded.

Eddie closed his eyes slowly and reopened them. “I’ll just put her back out,” he said.

I said nothing.

*

In New Jersey, I never saw the weather coming. The horizon was tree choked and the clouds gathered quickly. Yvette, the barn manager at the small stable where I could afford to keep Foxy (not run down but running), heard it every time. We'd be in the arena, me flatting Foxy or doing a gymnastic, her barking instructions to one of the never-ending string of kids that came for lessons, when suddenly she'd tell us to stop a moment. She'd twist her face against the stillness of the sky, listening, then "Everybody in. Now."

The storms came so fast. One minute, the thick mugginess; the next, a wall of rain that washed across the arena, instantly soaking anything in its path. We'd watch from the sliding doors of that ancient stable, the scent of straw hanging in the air, dry amidst the wondrous deluge. Five minutes later—ten max—it'd be over and we'd go back outside, the water quickly draining from the sandy footing of Yvette's outdoor arena, the air washed pure.

*

I had just gotten out of the shower when Jenny called, washing off the sweat and mustiness of another gym workout, washing off that stale, mirrored box, washing away the weighted bars, and the heavier stares of the men as they strutted from bench to bench, incline, decline, puffing their chests. My irritation hadn't totally washed away in hot, soapy water.

And then there was the irritation of the decision to be made: Foxfire or Zephyr, neither a great option. I didn't want a new horse. I didn't want my horse, old.

I decided I hated my apartment, from the pale beige walls that I was under contract not to paint, to the scratching of the cheap, synthetic carpet, to the stupid vinyl blinds on the windows, smudged by the greasy hand of whatever last tenant peeped through these windows. It was every apartment I had ever lived in.

I made coffee and stared at the clock, the loss of last night's sleep heavy under my eyes. When the phone rang, it felt like the culmination of all things gone wrong, the final straw.

"Yeah, hello," I'd said.

I almost hung up on the momentary silence, certain it was just another telemarketer despite the hour, when Jenny spoke up. "Um, sorry to call so early."

"Oh, that's ok," (marginally contrite,) "how are you doing?"

She was silent again for a moment. "Not so good."

I ran my finger over the dust on my dresser, drawing stick figures on its cherry surface, then hanging them in stick figure giblets as if they were the victims of unguessed words in a game I wasn't playing. They stood out bright and clear in the dust, though I'd only polished Saturday. "What's wrong?"

"Are you riding today?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Can I come over this afternoon, after the barn?"

"Sure." I stopped doodling. I seemed to hear a storm in the air. "Do you need to come over sooner? You can come over now."

"No. Just this afternoon, if it's ok. I'll be there around 4. I have to go now."

"OK," I said, but the line was dead before I'd gotten out the K. I was alone again, with my bland apartment, my suppositions, my filled travel mug ready for the hospital.

*

There is an art to taking a good radiograph, to dosing the radiation, to timing the amount of millisieverts. When I look at a body, when I touch a person to adjust their position, I'm calculating body mass and density, fat and muscle, so that I can get the best picture in the fewest tries. Because I am good at this, I've been cross-trained in CT and MRI, but x-rays remain my

favorite and so this is where I stay. Despite the speed and economy of computerized radiography, I miss the old gelatin and silver film of my first year on the job, the satisfying heft of the white plates we slid into the table, the flop of the developed film, the artifact of my art.

Through the day that Jenny had called coursed a steady stream of chest x-rays. It seemed I spent the whole day instructing people to take a deep breath and hold it. By the end of my shift, my lead apron weighed unnaturally heavy on my shoulders.

I beat Jenny to the barn by a good hour and a half. What did she know and how did she know it? I walked out to the back pasture and stared at Zephyr for twenty minutes, trying to decide what to do about her. No x-rays needed to see most of her bones: she wore them, or they wore her, or they were her—not much else to her. Still, I could see what Eddie saw: the angle of the bones in their sockets told that she could jump. Shoulders, pasterns, hocks: coiled springs. I wondered how long she'd starved and whether it compromised the strength of those perfectly angled bones, whether they would hold up to the landing of the jumps they promised. I ran my hand over my bruised arm; her teeth certainly seemed strong enough. I saddled Foxfire still undecided.

Jenny arrived when I was cooling down, and she and Zip took our place in the arena when I lead Foxy out. She said nothing to me, but her eyes were rimmed red. I wrapped Foxfire's hocks with magnets and brushed him for longer than usual, appreciating more than ever how quiet he stood. I cross-tied him only out of habit—he wasn't going anywhere. After I picked his hooves, he turned as far as the ties would allow him, perking his ears towards me. *Carrots?* he was saying. There were three in my grooming box. I untied Foxy and broke them in half, and holding them strategically: first one back by the girth on his near side, so he had to stretch to get it, then another on his off side, one low between his front hooves, and so on. There

were mixed reviews on the effectiveness of carrot stretches. Nothing in the research proved them to be all that effective; still, it was something, and if it gave us another day in the saddle together, it was worth it.

I removed the magnets, returned Foxy to his stall, and went out again to look at Zephyr, trying to determine my course while I waited for Jenny. I wondered if I should confess everything to her tonight, before she had a chance to say anything. Would it ease the blame? But surely she didn't know. Devastation did not have this composure.

Zephyr grazed, ignoring me completely. Not even an ear flick. For her, I was invisible, unworthy of notice. I picked up a stone and tossed it by her foot. Foxy would have galloped across the pasture had I done that to him, but Zephyr just turned, pointing her ass directly at me, and lazily swatting flies with her thin tail. I had not called Eddie that weekend.

"Why should I make anything out of you?" I asked the mare. "What's in this for me? You don't want to be a show horse anyway, do you? Not that you know what it's like, there in the ring with everyone watching. Everyone cheering."

A cowbird settled on the mare's withers. Grasshoppers jumped away from her teeth. I thought of all the ways she could hurt me. A hoof to the arm: broken bone and two months out of the saddle while it healed. A hoof to the gut: severe intestinal damage and a more lengthy recovery. A hoof to the head? I didn't want to think about that. (Retardation? Death? I'd heard the stories.)

A second cowbird joined the first. Zephyr ignored them both. She looked so tranquil like this: an illusion.

"I don't hit horses, you know." My words evaporated in the arid afternoon. "Only you. I'm not sure I like what you bring out of me."

Zephyr turned and bit at a fly, the snap of her teeth the only sound.

“Oh, to hell with you,” I said, but I kept standing there.

Moments passed. Nothing was my fault, and it was all my fault.

“If I work with you, you’ll only make my life hell. Frustrating me, biting me. I can’t even jump you yet, your flatwork is so bad.”

Zephyr walked a few paces for new grass. I threw up my hands and walked away.

Jenny was just finishing off Zip when I came in, wiping his face with a soft cloth to remove the sweat lines where the bridle had been. I decided to see where we stood with a neutral, non-intrusive question. “How’s Zip coming along?”

Jenny shrugged. “All right, I guess. He’s still a bit of a pain in the butt.” She didn’t look at me. She put Zip away; I cleaned my saddle. By the time I was done, she’d stowed all her stuff and swept the barn aisle.

“Do you want to just follow me home?” I asked.

She nodded.

I watched her Ford Taurus in my rearview all the way home, its tan exterior vaguely golden in the light of the lowering sun. She was a safe driver, and I slowed my speed on the gravel roads to adjust.

At my apartment, we ordered a pizza and turned on Monday night football. I offered her a beer, but she declined. I opened the bottle for myself and tossed her a pop. We sat back on the sofa and watched the game, quietly commenting when the refs made a bad call, the wide receiver made an impossible catch, or the back made a good run. I tried to sit casually in the sofa, but the loosened spring was digging into my shoulder blade. I considered moving to the chair, my

lovely comfy chair, but it felt wrong: my role was moral supporter and so I stayed where I was, sitting next to her, ready for her to talk.

Jenny stared at the screen impassively. I'd never seen her so unsmiling. Who was this, and what had she done with my friend? Surely, if she knew anything, she'd be screaming at me, not sitting calmly but silently on my couch. Her silence baffled me. I was desperate to know what she was thinking and feeling, but knew no way to ask. It wasn't until after the pizza man had left and we were into the second half that she said anything.

"Dave might call." Jenny continued to stare at the screen.

"OK." I separated a slice with quick fingers, sliding it onto my plate. I paused. "Are you guys ok?"

She still did not look at me. I tore off my crust and ate that first. The Eagles kicked a field goal. "He's mad at me, but it wasn't my fault." Her voice was matter-of-fact. Not whining, just stating the way things were.

I relaxed. I almost smiled, so relieved I felt. This wasn't about an affair—not with me, not with anyone else. "What happened?"

Jenny took a sip. She watched a couple of plays. Dallas's running back juke and darted but failed to make a first down. A foot cream commercial came on after the punt.

"We had this money sitting in the money market account, and we've been meaning to move it." Jenny spoke with her hands open, as if offering a truth. I let out a long breath, relieved that this had nothing to do with me. "We talked to the financial advisor last month, and he suggested some funds to put it in, but we hadn't done it yet. The advisor called me last week, and I tried to talk to Dave about it, but he kept saying he was tired from work and to stop bothering him. I know his new job is tough, and he wanted to kick back with me and do fun

stuff instead. The guys are giving him problems because he didn't work his way up like Dad did. But the money was just sitting, and someone had to make a decision. Not that I know anything about this stuff, but the advisor does, right? So when he called against yesterday afternoon asking whether to move the money, and I told him to go ahead and do it, since it sounded like it would do better and I thought that's what Dave wanted. I mentioned it to Dave, and he hit the roof. He said it wasn't my money, I didn't know shit about money, and I didn't have the right to move it."

"What a jackass."

The game was back on. Jenny's eyes shifted back to the television. "Maybe I shouldn't have moved it."

"Was Dave planning on spending it on something?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. We've got a savings account for stuff like that." She blushed. "He makes pretty good money. I think mainly he's just so stressed. It's not so much about the money as what he's going through to earn the money, but he won't talk to me about that. I don't think the guys like him. I guess he thinks I'd tell Daddy and he'd look bad."

I reached for a second piece of pizza. Dallas, unable to gain any more yards, punted. "Why didn't you come over here first thing this morning? You know, if he's being a jerk to you, you always have a place to stay."

"I had some things to do first."

I looked at Jenny and raised an eyebrow.

"The house was a mess. I always vacuum, clean the bathrooms, and wash whites on Mondays."

"You cleaned the fucking house?"

“And I made dinner.” Jenny sipped her pop.

“But you knew you were coming here to eat.”

“Dave still needed something to eat.” She laughed at herself as she said it. It was the first time she’d smiled all evening. “I left it in the fridge with a note on the counter saying how long to cook it, and letting him know where I was and why I needed to get out for a while.”

Before I could respond, the phone rang. Dave’s voice was low but steady on the line, asking to speak to his wife. That was how he asked for her: his wife. I held the receiver to my palm.

“It’s Dave. Do you want to talk to him?”

“Should I go home?” Jenny looked worried.

“Hell no.” I hissed the words, though I still had the receiver covered by my hand. “Stay here as long as you need.”

Jenny held out her hand for the phone, and I walked through the vertical blinds and out onto the small balcony off the living room while they spoke, shutting the glass sliding door behind me. The sound did not carry outward.

Twilight. I looked over the parking lot. A girl in an Arby’s polo shirt hurried from her car towards home, pulling a visor from her hair as she crossed the parking lot. I imagined she’d just finished helping cover the dinner rush and was hungry now for quiet and a meal of her own. The silent apartment after the bustle of work, the hanging screens flashing orders to prepare, the grumbling workers shoving by to bag sandwiches, the manager barking to speed up, speed up. Minimum wage.

And then the stillness of the gloaming, when night really did feel like it was falling, like the sky was lowering closer to earth. No crickets in town, the leaves on the few trees at the edge

of the paved lot still too green to rustle much in the faint breeze. The stars cloaked in townlight and the lingering light of dusk.

The door slid in its tracks. "I told Dave I wasn't quite ready to come home yet."

"Good girl."

"After the game, I'll probably go."

"You don't need to do that. Stay here."

The quiet night, the ghost boxes of apartment buildings. "No. I should go back. But I want to see if he'll apologize first."

"He didn't apologize?"

"He will." Jenny picked at the peeling paint on the edge of the railing, then flicked a chip over the side. As hard as I looked at her, I couldn't work out what she was thinking. I swallowed the last of my beer. "Well," Jenny said. "I think I'll go in and watch the rest of the game."

I had the desire to fling my bottle over the railing, to watch the glittering arc of distilled glow condensed from the distant street light playing on its brown glass, turning end over end. Its final smash: the spray of shards skittering across asphalt.

I did not throw the bottle. I carried it in to the recycling bin and opened another beer, settling down into my sofa, the bad spring again digging my back. I picked up my half-eaten slice of pizza, cold now, puddles of cheese grease congealing on its surface, and I ate. We didn't talk. We just watched as one team strategized, threw, darted, did all they could to move through the other, to gain a few more yards, to move towards the goal.

When Dave called again, midway through the fourth quarter, he apologized. He and Jenny talked, and I surveyed the parking lot again, the last gleam of car windows. Mainly, it was

students who lived here, the paint on their old cars dull and unwaxed under the lustrous windows. American cars, for the most part, but assembled God knows where. Ford, Chevy, Dodge. None of their owners were out now, though in the building across the parking lot, two girls had come out to sit on their deck, talking softly, laughing periodically. Their conversation went on and on. Dave and Jenny talked and talked. I stood there silent, no one to talk with. I wondered what Timothy was up to, wondered whether or not he was watching the game. I ached to run my hands through his hair. But the route to him felt blocked, so I turned my thoughts. I wondered what Foxfire was doing—picking at his hay? sleeping? Were the Eagles still up? My God, it was dull out here. I looked for the stars I couldn't see. Only Venus was bright enough to penetrate the glow, but she was hidden behind the hills.

The door slid open behind me, and I turned to see Jenny's sheepish smile. "I'm going home now."

"You don't need to do that."

"It's ok. He said he was sorry."

"It doesn't change the fact he was wrong."

Jenny looked at me oddly. My tone had been a little too harsh.

I shook it off. "Or go home. Whatever."

Jenny nodded her head. "I think it's time. I appreciate it, though." She nodded towards my living room. "Letting me come by and all."

"Any time," I said. "Any time Dave's a jerk, you've got a place to stay."

Jenny took it as a joke and laughed. "I appreciate that."

I walked her to the door and saw her out. If she hurried, she'd be home before the two minute warning. I shoved the whole pizza box into my fridge even though there were only a

couple slices left and I had to smush its resistant cardboard with the refrigerator door to get it to fit. I filled a large glass of water, heavy on the ice, and settled back into my easy chair, relishing how well its curved back fit the contours of my back, determined to make my mind as clear as that water, and perhaps as cold. I didn't need anyone. People got in the way, made life even more complicated than it already was. I needed money and a horse: that was all. The Eagles scored again, safely sealing the lead.

*

Tuesday morning, I went running. August had given way to September, and the mornings were growing ever cooler. That morning, for the first time in months, I had to dig a sweatshirt out of the trunk in my closet. I pulled it on over my tee shirt and old soccer shorts, laced my shoes and hit the road. The grasshoppers had all but disappeared. Birds sang me down the road. It felt good to run that day, like a way of exorcising something, sweating it out. My legs and lungs felt endless. I could leap tall buildings, I could stride out and out. The air so clean. The rhythmic expansions of my rib cage as it filled my lungs. Thank God for this, I thought. For action without words. For my moving body. For a space where there only seemed to be me, alone in the world. Thank God. I was powerful; I was in control; I was a runner. I moved in leaps and bounds over the earth.

I turned down Mountain View and lengthened my stride on the long straight stretch of road. A man on a bike pedaled toward me, his bright red windbreaker flapping. A safe choice, I thought. Very visible to passing cars.

I was surprised to see the biker slow as he approached and to notice his shy grin. "Good morning, Joan," he said, the metal tap of his clipped shoe on the pavement punctuating his salutation.

I halted, the roadside gravel skating slightly under my feet, and looked closer at the man under the helmet. Dr. Rivers—only, I barely recognized him. His graying hair, perpetually slicked and greased at work, now flew out from every direction under the shining, seemingly windswept plastic of the helmet. Here, in the sun and lacking his white coat, his skin took on a healthier glow. But there was more to it than that. It was as if he'd left home without the stick he always carried up his butt. I stammered a hello and apologized for not recognizing him sooner. "I guess I was in my own world," I said.

"That's the whole point of being out here, right?" He actually smiled. A true smile. With teeth.

"Yeah." I searched for something else to say, trying to stifle my heavy breathing as I fought to get my wind. "Nice bike." It was, too—shocks front and rear, gears and gears, rapid fire shifters. The paint was scuffed here and there. This bike had been on the mountains. I tried to imagine Dr. Rivers out in nature, recklessly barreling down a steep decline. "I didn't realize you were into biking."

"And I had no idea you were a runner."

I shrugged it off. "I'm more of a flopper," I said. "But that's only two steps below 'jogger,' so I'm not without potential."

Dr. Rivers only smiled again. He seemed to want to say something else. I wanted to go, but I didn't want to be rude. The pause was beginning to seem uncomfortable when he said, "well, I'll let you get back to it, then."

"You, too—have a good ride," I said, relieved the conversation (if such an exchange qualified as conversation) was over.

I struggled to find my stride again. It didn't come with the ease it had earlier. The brief stop changed everything, as stops can. My legs felt awkward, my knees began to ache, my arms were all in the wrong places. My running shoes did not absorb the road shock like they had. My shorts rode up on my thighs. I stopped to pull off my sweatshirt and tie it around my waist and hoped to get the rhythm again when I resumed my run, but I never quite found it—not like I'd found it earlier. I continued to jog along, the morning spoiled.

*

Wednesday evening came, and still, I had not called Eddie and I had not called Timothy, though I'd had phone messages from both. The time never seemed quite right. I never seemed to know what I wanted to say. I thought of Timothy as I groomed Foxy, trying to figure out why I hadn't called him. I wanted to. I wanted to hear his voice, to invite him over, to talk to him again. I'd been waiting for his call: a signal that he was interested in me, too, but now that he'd left his message, I couldn't stand the thought of speaking to him through wire. Connie came into the barn as I was finishing up with Fox. "You talked to Jenny lately?" she asked.

"No. Something wrong?"

"No, not wrong. She's looking for a horse. She told me that her husband is, and I quote, *letting* her buy one."

I looked at Connie's impassive face, then turned again to Foxy's copper flanks, brushing, brushing. She'd gotten an apology out of Dave all right.

"I've got a couple geldings in mind that I think she'll want to look at, but I'll talk to Eddie first before I make any phone calls. I'm sure he'll have some thoughts."

I stared at Foxy's flank, the bloom of his coat growing as the brush brought the oils to the surface. "It seems so fast. She's only been riding a couple months." I felt the lump in my throat: jealousy.

"That's a couple months more than most people who buy horses. And, she's going to keep doing lessons with Eddie, so there's that."

She was right, but I couldn't help smirking anyway. "I'll have to call her tonight and say congratulations." I lead Foxy to his stall.

"Too bad Foxy's not jumping any more," Connie said, watching us. "Three years ago, he would have been perfect."

"I'm not selling Foxfire." I slid the bolt home on his stall door.

Connie squinted slightly, appraising me. "I don't think you could sell him now if you wanted to, but I'm glad to know you're looking out for him in his retirement."

"It's the least I can do." The choke in my voice caught me off guard, as did my anger towards Connie's appraisal. Unable to jump, losing the canter, unreliable on the trails: Foxy, as far as the market was concerned, was worthless. How fucking little "the market" knew. I cleared my throat and tapped the edge of my paddock boot against the rubber matting of the aisle way. I ground the loosened dirt under my heel.

"Well," Connie said, "keep your ears out for decent starter horses. Something sane but talented. It sounds like she'd got some money to spend. Let me know if you hear of anything."

"Will do."

I put my stuff away and started my truck. I didn't open the windows right away, nor did I back out from my parking spot. Instead, I sat in its warmth for several minutes, thinking, allowing the truck's trapped afternoon heat to seep into my already work-warmed muscles before

making my move. Dry heat. Suffocating heat. Purifying heat. I drank some tepid water from a plastic bottle, opened the windows, and shifted into reverse.

That day, I would not go by the store on my way home from the barn. It could wait. Instead, I went directly to my apartment and called Eddie.

“I’ll work with Zephyr.” I said, in answer to his *Hello?*

“Joan?”

“Yeah—why, have you offered her to anyone else?”

“No. I just didn’t know you’d made up your mind.”

“It’s made up.”

“OK.” He hesitated. “Good. We’ll do your lesson on her tomorrow.”

“That’s settled then.” I hung up before I could say another word.

*

By the time I reached Rosauers, Timothy was just ending his shift, so, instead of buying something frozen and nasty, I asked him if he wanted to go to Eric’s cafe. He raised an eyebrow, and I half expected some questions about the unreturned phone call, but he said nothing. Over milkshakes, emu burgers and curly fries, I told him about my week: my decision to ride Zephyr, the strangeness of Monday night.

He nodded a single, curt, appreciative nod when I told him about Jenny cleaning and cooking for her husband before coming to my house. “Strong woman,” he said.

“Weak woman. –I can’t believe she still did that, like it was 1950 and she was Donna Reed.”

“That’s why she’s so strong. She put her own anger aside and did what she thought was her job.”

I stared at him: his dark calm eyes. “She made his fucking dinner. He didn’t deserve that.”

Timothy shrugged. “That’s why I think it’s so tough. She didn’t do the work because he deserved it. She did it for some other reason.”

“What other reason?”

Timothy dipped his fry in fry sauce. “No clue.” He smiled, put the fry into his mouth, chewed, swallowed. “But whatever it was, you can bet your ass it had nothing to do with him. He doesn’t control what she does. That’s a strong woman.”

I thought about this long into the night. Was he telling me how to think, instructing *me* on the strength of my friend, a friend he’d never met, or was he simply giving me food for thought? Picturing Jenny—so thin and wispy, remembering the way she leaned on Dave at El Mercado’s, the reverent way she spoke of him in casual conversation, I wasn’t convinced that Timothy was right. But I wasn’t convinced that I was right either. Jenny was getting a horse. Jenny was married to the man she decided loved her, and had gotten her father to hire him at a good salary even though her father had hated him. Jenny seemed to know how to get what she wanted.

And me: Instead of being curled up in Timothy’s flannel shirt, I was alone under an old quilt. Timothy had gone home to finish some reading. I tried not to resent this. I wondered if he was thinking of me at all as he read, whether, at least, I was distracting him the way he was distracting me. I couldn’t quite read those damned eyes. There was something in them that invited me in and something else that barred the door.

*

Dr. Rivers hovered all that day at work. I'd never known him to keep his silence when he wanted to speak, so his quiet, proximal bumbings aroused unsatisfied curiosity. He had no reason to even be around. I waited for his pager to call him back, but ER was unusually slow that day. Every few minutes, it seemed, he was back in Imaging, fingering through file cabinets, "making sure everything was going all right," as if it didn't always, as if it was any of his business anyway. I began to wonder if he were spying on us—and, if so, to what end?

So it was a relief to get back to the straightforward problems at the barn that afternoon: the teeth I knew were coming, the hooves sure to kick. Dawn was crossing the driveway as I pulled in, an unopened bale of alfalfa in the cart she pushed. On seeing me, a shit-eating grin stretched across her face. She rested the cart as I got out. "I heard you're riding Zephyr."

"Yep." I squinted off towards the pasture where the mare grazed peacefully.

"That horse is wound up tighter than a gnat's ass stretched over a skillet." Dawn beamed.

"She's a little tense."

"A little tense? She charges me when I go in her pasture with her god damned grain."

I shrugged. "Speaking of tense, is there any where I can put Foxfire while I have my lesson." Foxfire, standing outside in his stall run at the far end of the barn, nickered on hearing his name. "He's a little jealous."

"You could shut the barn door and lock him out in his stall run for the hour. That's what I do when I clean his stall or else he paces around me and drives me crazy."

"I guess that would work, although he still might hear us in the indoor."

"The only other good spot would be Zephyr's paddock. I could throw him in there for you when you get her out."

"That might be better."

Foxy was listening to us, ears perked. Dawn laughed again. “You’ve got the only horse who gets jealous of work.”

“I don’t know that it’s the work he misses,” I said. “I think it’s the attention.”

“Because you spoil him?”

“No.” I said, annoyed that everyone seemed to share this assumption. “I just treat him how he deserves—he’s a good boy. Anyway, it’s not *my* attention he misses. I think he misses being in the ring. The silence when he jumped his round, then the applause when he jumped well, everyone watching him, everyone admiring him. Work is just as close as he comes to that feeling now.”

“Shit, you’re depressing.”

“Sorry.” We stared at Fox a moment longer. “How much do you think it would cost to have him cloned?”

“What, you mean like in a test tube or something?” She looked over at him skeptically. “No clue, but I bet it aint cheap.”

“I heard they cloned a mule at U of I last year.”

“Yeah, and now I’m sure they’ve gotten requests from every rich bitch with a favorite cat. Can you make me a new Fifi? I simply can’t bare to part with this one.” Dawn drew her a’s long and round: caaan’t baaaare, as if all rich people spoke with bad British accents.

“You’re probably right,” I said.

“And besides, it’d be creepy, having a Foxy that wasn’t really Foxy.”

“Yeah.” I kicked at the gravel of the parking lot. “I don’t think I’d really clone him even if I could afford to. I wish I could reverse his aging and make him young again. Man, if I had him at six years now, imagine what we could do.”

“Would you stop being so fucking depressing? Jeez, I already asked you once.”

Guilty as charged, I smiled.

“Go grab Zephyr. I’ll put Foxy out. Maybe that damned mare’ll knock some sense into you, as long as she don’t knock too hard.”

“Thanks, man.”

“You bet.”

The grey of the mare’s coat had gained a little luster after a week of the high fat, high protein grain Eddie put her on. It gave her a sheen that, with the lightness of her coat, seemed almost ghostly, as if she were more air than flesh.

There was nothing ethereal about her viciousness. As I unlatched the gate, she spun and ran at me. I swung the halter in a wide arc in front of me, not to hit her but to define a space she would not invade, a boundary that she would cross only by taking a blow. She halted just shy of it, tossing her head and rolling her eyes. “Easy now,” I said, and swung the lead rope around her neck to catch her, keeping my elbow raised in defense.

Zephyr came out of her paddock all hellfire and bone—the bone of each hard tooth, the coffin bone within each ironclad hoof pointing to its target like a driven spear. She danced on the lead rope with athletic grace and balance. I only had to convince her to use that athleticism for me instead of against me, but I had no clue how I was going to pull that off. Already, I felt the edges of my patience beginning to crumble. “Walk like a normal damned horse, please,” I said. No reaction.

Tugging a horse is useless; Zephyr’s neck muscle, thin as it was, was still at least five or six times as thick as my arm. If we fought a battle of physical strength, she would win. Our

battle would be a battle of wits and strategic strikes. I gave the lead rope a modicum of slack then yanked it hard, popping her on the nose to correct her poor ground manners.

Zephyr pulled back against the halter. I let her drag me a little, balancing like a water skier against the rope and raising the spare end of the lead threateningly when she tried to rear. The gravel rolled underfoot, then stopped. She stood, and we regarded each other, standing there in the parking lot, each waiting for the other's next move.

After a moment, Zephyr's head lowered almost imperceptibly. "All right," I said, going again to her side, her eye following me. "Let's try again. Walk on."

Zephyr took one step and then threw her body back on its haunches, so that she was almost sitting, and tossing her head high.

Again, I held the rope against her struggle, giving nothing. I thought of Clint in the final show down of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*: the dizzying camera work, the increasingly claustrophobic close-ups, the dirt, the burning cigarillo, the watching eyes. The wait, the wait. The quick draw, the response.

She stood; the dust settled. Again, we watched each other. "Are you done?" I said. She merely stood, her head stretched high, her snorting breath. I waited. Behind me, I could hear Dawn chuckling from the barn door over the more distant mumbling of Eddie's voice directing Jenny's lesson. "I can wait all day, horse," I said, though in truth, we had about twenty minutes until our lesson started and I needed to get her in the cross ties soon if I would have her ready in time. Each fallen dust mote was a second hand ticking.

Her nostrils flared and relaxed, flared and relaxed, replacing the oxygen wasted in struggle. Her pinned ears flicked forward to catch Dawn's laugh.

“She’s laughing at you, you know,” I told Zephyr. We continued to stand another moment. When her head dropped a little again, we walked on. We made it almost to the barn door when she spun against the halter, the lead rope abrading my hands before I clamped down my grip again and stopped its slide, irritated at myself both for having unwittingly relaxed and for forgetting to put on my gloves—everyone was right; I’d been spoiled by Foxfire.

Dawn stood at my shoulder. She patted me on the back. “Good luck.” Her voice was light with choked off laughter. Zephyr relaxed when she walked away.

“What the hell happened to make you so ornery?” I whispered. Zephyr’s eye rolled white and she pulled her head high again, but it didn’t last. She walked into the barn.

She bit my forearm when I snapped her in the crossties—hard enough to pinch and bruise but not quite enough to remove skin or flesh. I was quick in getting out of her way, but not quick enough. I pulled my jumping bat from my brush box and dealt her one good pop on her on the shoulder. The thwack of its broad leather topper was loud and startling, though it had no sting. I’ve tested all my whips and crops against my thigh so I knew exactly how much force would deliver how much sound and sting, and I speak from experience when I say this bat had no sting to offer. The sound was enough. She shuffled around in the crossties, pulling against them, looking for an out. I pointed that crop at her like Patton delivering a point. “Don’t bite me, and don’t get hit.” She quieted slightly when I tucked the bat into my boot where it would be close at hand. She stayed well back, the crossties pulled taught against their bolts. I caught hold of her halter and walked her a pace forward. “We’ll be ok, as long as you learn some basic manners. Now, biting me is no good. That’s rule one. No biting, no kicking. Got it?”

I glanced over at Eddie and Jenny in the ring, but neither appeared to have noticed Zephyr or me. Eddie had laid out poles in the dirt and Jenny was trying to coax Zip into a more

forward canter so that they got from pole to pole in three strides instead of four. She was getting about three and a half—the half, an ugly bumpy little stride Zip added before the rail. Under the ever-present cap, Eddie was frowning.

I grabbed a dandy brush and got to work, brushing the dirt off her back and belly so that it would not rub under her saddle. We no longer had time for a more thorough grooming before the lesson began. She pinned and pinned her ears at each stroke of the brush, the tossing of her head synchronous to the movement of my arm. When she tried to kick again, I called her “bitch” and swatted her, once, with the bat. Somehow, I managed to get tacked up without more bruises.

Our lesson was composed of circles, endless circles. One direction and the other. Figure eights, voltes, an occasional serpentine. Transitions to trot, to walk, to canter, to halt. Simple stuff, but not dull—Zephyr made sure of that, worming and squiggling under saddle. Again, there were glimmers, moments when she actually stretched for the bit. Then she’d remember herself, and she’d throw her head up and back, practically in my lap. Eddie’s voice droned on through all of it, steady and calm. His watching eyes always on us. Small adjustments, a little more leg, a little less rein, and there she’d be again, a horse one would want to ride. And then it’d be gone, her head up and her trot jarring.

“More of this, all week,” he said when we finished. I nodded from the saddle. It was our homework assignment, now that I’d agree to the work. Zephyr turned and grabbed the toe of my boot. I yanked my foot free, inadvertently kicking her hard in the side when it sprung loose from her teeth. Zephyr grunted with the force of the kick, but she neither reeled nor bolted. She had guts; I’d grant her that.

Eddie tilted his head and watched it all. “Maybe next time we’ll add a little lateral work; maybe more trot poles. But for this week, I want bending and transitions. Let’s see if we can’t

get her to trust our hands a little more and accept the bit.” I nodded again and dismounted. My toes ached against the pressure of my own weight and the soft footing.

Eddie walked me to the crossties. “Short rides, still. No more than half an hour while we get her fit. And *your* job is to focus on your elbows and shoulders. I want much more relaxation out of you. You need to learn to trust her as much as she needs to trust you.”

“When I give, she bites my toes.” I spoke in a low voice and didn’t look at Eddie, but I knew he heard.

“Give, but watch out.”

“Constant vigilance.”

“Right. Constant vigilance.”

I sighed and looked at her. “She actually looks a little better already. She’s got a long way to go, but she’s little less... hollow.”

Eddie nodded. “And she’s going to get stronger, too.”

“Great.”

“It might not be so bad. Once she gets some muscle on that top line, she might not shrink from the saddle so much.” He watched me as I took off his old hunting bridle and Foxy’s saddle and brushed her down. “No carrots?” he asked, when I moved to clip on the lead rope.

“You want me to put my hands near that mouth? near those teeth?”

Eddie laughed. “I think it’s time we start treating her like a normal horse.” He grabbed a carrot out of my grooming box (one of Foxy’s carrots) and, snapping it in half, offered it to “Zephie” on his flattened palm. She jerked back in the ties, away from the treat.

“Good Lord, horse,” I said, as she struggled back against the chain ties. “You are messed up.”

Eddie dropped his hand and walked to her side, eyeing her. He walked her up a few steps and let her stand a moment. Slowly, he raised the carrot in his left hand, stroking her neck with his right. He touched it against her jowl and moved it down toward her nostril so she could smell it. Her eyes whitened, and she jerked away. “Hmph.” (Eddie’s short snort.) “I don’t think she knows what it is.”

I shook my head and laughed. “A horse who doesn’t know what a carrot is.”

“We’ll put this one in her grain and let her figure it out on her own. She didn’t know what apples or sugar cubes were either, but I hadn’t tried carrots yet.”

I lead Zephyr out. She walked quietly enough now, though her ear and eye were constantly upon me. Foxfire paced the fenceline of her pasture, neighing with all his might. I tied Zephyr to the fence and retrieved Foxy, tied him to the fence and released her, untied Foxy, climbed the fence, and mounted his bare back, riding him briefly over soft loam of the hills as the twilight deepened around us, and then back to the barn. It would become our routine, my post-Zephyr unwinding, my relief.

*

There was a message from Timothy on my machine when I got home. This time, I returned his call right away.

“Hey,” he said, in answer to my own hello. “I’d called to see if you wanted to come over for some dinner, but when I didn’t hear from you, I figured I’d just better go ahead and eat.”

“Sorry,” I said. Not sorry that I’d spent the evening riding Foxy and Zephyr, but sorry to have missed dinner. My belly rumbled. “I was at the barn late tonight. A lesson.” I looked at the clock. It was eight, and I was starving. I tried to think what food I had.

“How was it?”

“What?”

“The lesson.”

I thought about telling him, then thought about how long I would be on the phone if I opened this can of worms. “I’ll tell you what,” I said instead, “I’ll tell you over dessert somewhere if you want, but I’ve got to eat something.”

Timothy laughed. An intimate, gentle laugh. A laugh as warm as the receiver pressed against my ear, my smallest bones reverberating, the strummed drum of my ear, its hammer, anvil, stirrup. “Where to?” he said.

“Shit. I’d even eat McDonalds at this point.” Then, fearing that he might take me at my word, “no, strike that. I’m not that desperate yet.”

“A gyro and baklava?”

“Perfect.”

“I’ll be by in fifteen minutes,” he said, and hung up before I had time to respond. It was a very boyfriend-y move, I noted, from someone who had yet to even tried to kiss me: picking me up for a date, though he wasn’t really because he didn’t have a car, only that old ten speed which looked iffy even holding one passenger. Perhaps a good sign, his coming to get me. I reminded myself that I did not need or want a boyfriend, that it would only interfere with my time at the barn. I was having more trouble believing it, but I didn’t want to hope for too much.

No time for a shower, I blew the crusty black boogers from my nose (a side effect of breathing in dusty arenas) and washed the layered silt from my face, neck, and arms. Rivulets of grime coursed down the drain. I swapped dirty breeches for jeans, dirty tee shirt for clean, pulled on clean socks and a comfortable pair of shoes. Almost as an afterthought, I sprayed a couple squirts of perfume under my shirt, just in case my antiperspirant was starting to fail. I stuffed my

helmet-ravaged hair into an old ball cap and called it good enough. Hardly the love goddess I could wish to be, but a more honest version of myself than I would have been in more seductive attire.

He knocked just as I finished putting myself together. “You changed already?” he said.

“I’m quick, man.” He wore a familiar flannel shirt and jeans. His hair was brushed and glossy. I’d had long hair once, years ago, but had cut it shoulder-length to better fit under my helmet. “Did you expect anything less?”

“I don’t know.” He looked away and smiled. “You’re awfully cute in your riding pants.”

He was definitely flirting with me. There were no two ways about that comment; its suggestiveness tripped me up. “Sorry,” I said, and then, (*I don’t need a boyfriend, I don’t need a boyfriend*), recovering, “I’m sure I still smell like horse, if that’s turn on enough.”

He laughed again, that lovely subtle laugh, more like brook sound than a human laugh. “Let’s get you fed,” he said. He put his arm around me in an old-pals kind of way, a quick squeeze and release.

*

I thought back on our dinner the next day at work. There, in the lonely quiet of humming machines, I thought of the way he leaned on his hands and watched me eat, waiting to eat his baklava until I had polished off my gyro. I told him about Zephyr and showed him the new bruise on my arm, the broad red where she’d first gotten hold of me, the thin blue line marked my skin where it stuck in her teeth as I yanked clear. “Ouch!” he’d laughed. “Tell me again why you like this sport?”

Sitting in the darkened radiography lab, I thought of walking with him after dinner in Friendship Square, not holding hands, and later, sitting by the dry fountain, still not holding

hands. He told me about his math professor, how crazy he was with his flying hair, the pens in his pocket chronically askew. “I want to think he’s brilliant,” he told me, “but it’s tough to say. It’s possible he’s just insane.” How easily he smiled, even when he told me he was struggling in that class, thinking he was going to get a tutor. “Define ‘struggling.’” I said. He ducked his head a little, hiding behind his wall of hair. “I might get a B.” We laughed in chorus. “I know—I’m a nerd, right? I really want a perfect GPA, though. I see these kids in the classes, slacking off. They’re there because it is expected of them. They don’t know what it means to go to college.” I thought about that; I’d never really appreciated my own education either, always doing only enough to get by.

Room 1: There weren’t many patients today: several stomach x-rays early on in preparation for surgeries, an appendix, three knees. Herman Kraus was in ER again—another possible heart attack. It was the fourth time I’d x-rayed his chest that year. He got crankier every time. Having four x-rays apparently entitled him to tell me how to do my job, instructing me on how I should line up the portable unit. He complained of the weight of the apron on his waist and genitals (*Christ, Joannie—are you trying to sterilize me? Damned if that wasn’t dead on the nuts!*), of the nurse’s slowness (*Did they forget to brew the coffee today, ladies?*), of the lack of attention with which he was served, all as we buzzed around him and attended to his comfort. Outside of the ER, I knew Kraus to be a nice man. I passed him often as he walked his bichon frise, a small white poof that he doted on. Pain brought out the ugly in some people.

Late in the afternoon, just before the end of my shift, Dr. Rivers walked into the lab. For once, he hadn’t slicked back his hair. Its relaxed wave framed his forehead and made him look oddly like one of the men in the L.L. Bean catalogue, a definite improvement from his slicked back norm.

“Joan, I was just looking for you.”

“You found me.”

“Ha, yes.” He ran his hand through his hair, then fiddled with his name tag, straightening it although it was already straight. It was like he was nervous, which I couldn’t believe he was. “Nothing pressing. I’m having a small get-together tomorrow night—bread and cheese, a little wine, that sort of thing—and I thought you might want to stop by.”

I watched him as he straightened the expensive pens in his coat, trying to read his invitation. I wondered how long he’d been thinking of inviting me, why he hadn’t invited me until now, and why he finally decided I should be there. I wondered if this had anything to do with bumping into me on the road, or whether it had something to do with some other thing I’d said or done. Or whether it had nothing to do with me—was it one of those things where he just needed even numbers of ladies and gents? “Sure. That sounds nice.” (It sounded terrible. I wished I had the excuse of a date with Timothy to get out from going, or at the very least, that I could say he was my boyfriend and ask to bring him along so I’d have at least one person I could talk to.)

“Great.” He took out his prescription pad and scribbled his address and phone number on the back.

“What time should I stop by?”

“Eight-ish?” He held out the small white paper.

“I’ll be there.” I looked at his hand-writing. “Good lord. Don’t you doctors ever try to break the stereotype? Is this a four or a nine?”

He moved to look over my shoulder, his hand on my hand turning the scrawled writing towards him. “Four. And no, we don’t try to break the stereotype. Bad penmanship is part of

the Hippocratic oath.” And without cracking a smile or waiting for a laugh, he removed his hand from mine and walked out of the room, leaving me to discern whether his sarcasm was a symptom of irritation or just dry wit.

From the hospital, I went by Rosauers and picked up a sandwich at the deli, slightly out of the way to the barn. Timothy was working late that night. Rosauers looked as busy as the hospital had been, so I didn’t chat other than to tell Timothy that I had an obnoxious wine and cheese thingy at Dr. Rivers’s to attend tomorrow night. His face showed no reaction, aggravatingly impassive. “Call me before?” was all he said. I half-wished I’d said it was a date, just to see what he would have done. Instead, I just left.

I ate in the car and changed into riding clothes at the barn, wondering if Timothy was thinking of me. I rode Zephyr, Foxfire, went home dirty, and collapsed on the couch. I woke up hours later with a headache and a crick in the neck. It seemed a fitting end to the day.

*

First thing Saturday morning, I ran.

If there is evidence of the existence of God, it lies in the human foot. Nearly six feet of moving flesh and bone should not be able to balance on that meager foundation, the foot. When we run, an area no bigger than a dog’s paw contacts the earth. It defies physics. It defies rational thought. Yet, through a million thoughtless adjustments of muscle, the spreading and unspreading of our toes, the shifts in weight, we not only stand but walk, run, jump. No human inventor could manufacture so finely tuned an engine.

In high school, I once argued with Jennifer’s boyfriend over whether horses or motorcycles were a better all-terrain vehicle. He maintained that motorcycles don’t buck you off. I countered that they did, but when motorcycles threw you in a ditch, they did not return

home and alert others that you were hurt. Horses could jump walls that motorcycles had to circumvent. Horses were not loud, they did not poison the planet with toxic fumes. They were more expensive, but they were worth what they cost.

But, thinking of my human foot, I realized that neither horses nor motorcycles are the ultimate off road vehicle. Neither is as versatile, as adept, as capable as the unaided human. Neither can climb trees or scale chain link or rappel down a sheer face of rock. With time and stamina enough, I can traverse just about anything.

Tonight, for instance, I would get through Dr. Rivers's cocktail party. With luck, someone I knew would be there, anyone I could chat with to make the time pass. Hell, at this point, I'd even take Cheryl. Somehow, though, I doubted he'd invited her. Again, I wondered what I'd done to warrant my own last-minute invitation.

*

I followed my run with a quick ride, then realized I had nothing else to do besides get ready for the party that was still many hours away. I drove out to see my parents, again. These weekly visits were something new. When I first left home for college, to get my certification, there was always homework to do and roommates to hang out with. Now, these last few months, I seemed to be making up for all the times I'd missed them in New Jersey.

When I pulled in, they were turning a portion of the garden. This year's summer vines (tomatoes, zucchini, yellow squash) were pulled, sitting atop in with this year's compost; last year's compost was spread in uneven heaps on the unturned parts of the summer garden, ready to be worked in. They dug without speaking, preparing the earth for its dormancy, its sleep under the snow.

Pilate slept under the apple tree in a scratched up patch of earth. He hadn't heard my truck pull in. He didn't see me now. Didn't raise his ears. Didn't wag his tail. It was my father who saw me first, looking up to wipe the sweat from his forehead with a dirty sleeve. "Well look what the cat dragged in."

"I expect you're going to put me to work?"

Mom paused and leaned on the handle of her garden fork. "How else are you going to earn your dinner?"

"Sorry. Can't stay for dinner tonight—I've got to go to a cocktail thing for work. I just came to see if I could make myself useful in the meantime." I grabbed a spade from the shed and began turning soil, thankful for this place where nothing really ever changed much and nothing was complicated.

Later, back at my apartment, I called Timothy only to get the machine. I left a brief message ("Joan here, just getting ready for the party. Talk to you later.") and flipped through the hangers in my closet. I tried to gauge which outfit might best cover the bruises on my legs and arms while still looking somewhat formal—at least formal by western standards. Compared to the work of turning soil, it seemed an unnecessarily difficult decision. I remembered the few cocktail parties from my New Jersey years—an entirely different beast. The first was a barn Christmas party hosted by the owner of a large Hanoverian gelding that had been imported from Germany two years before. I showed up in clean jeans and a holiday sweater, only to find a room full of sequins and suits, martinis all around. It was my first lesson in the east coast party etiquette of the upper classes: people there dressed—for dinner, for barn Christmas parties. Opportunities to be glamorous were seized. The hospital Christmas party had been no

different—the doctors and their spouses more glamorous, even; the nurses, techs, and others were only a little more casual. At least by then I was prepared.

But this was Idaho. A doctor's party, yes, a wine and cheese, yes, but still an Idaho gathering. I showered and pulled out a pair of jeans and a mock-turtleneck sweater. By the time I dried my hair and put on some make-up, it was 7:30, and time to calculate exactly how late I should be. I was never good at that kind of math.

I showed at 8:30. Only three other couples had arrived: an OB/GYN and her husband, an older couple that I recognized from the pictures of the hospital's Board, and a small tan man and his wife who introduced themselves, immediately, as being from Nepal. They did this repeatedly through the evening, each time one of them met a new person. Hello, I'm [X]; I'm from Nepal. I came to think of this as their function at the party: to be the couple from Nepal. How glamorous. How kind to have invited them. What an open-minded man, their presence said. He'd met them on the Wheatland Express, the bus that linked Moscow, Idaho and Pullman, Washington, eight miles to the west. They had hit it off, Dr. Rivers had explained, as if the phrase offered explanation. I wondered again at his motivation for having me here. What demographic did I represent? What generosity was my presence supposed to illustrate? Dr. Rivers's kindness to his inferiors? His democratic good nature?

I balanced a heavy crystal goblet in my hand and tried to think of intelligent things to say. I asked the couple from Nepal how they liked it here, realizing as soon as I asked it that it was a question that left them no choice but to say they liked it a lot. "You don't have to," I said, "I don't always like it here." The couple from Nepal just looked at me oddly and moved on to mingle elsewhere, with Americans more adept at casual conversation, leaving me with no one to talk with. I felt a surge of anger that Timothy hadn't made a move, that he wasn't here with me

now, helping me endure this social obligation. In retrospect, it wasn't fair. I'd been so sure I didn't need a boyfriend, so sure I was better off on my own, so enmeshed in the disaster of Dave, my reluctance to start something new must have been palpable despite my attraction. Something in the way I stood, hips slung defiantly, the folded arms across my chest, my constant smirk: all messages I'd been sending even as I flirted. Everything said, *stay back, man*. As much as I wanted a boyfriend, I feared entanglement. Yet here I was resenting the fact that he hadn't made a move. Timothy didn't owe me anything. Even so, I wondered where he'd been that afternoon, when he knew I was going to call him, when he'd asked me to call. Not that he had to be home, but still.

Dr. Rivers's house was beautiful. Along one wall, real paintings—not prints but oil on canvas, modernistic pieces that seemed all color and movement—were spot lit by recessed lighting. Along another, stained glass windows, apparently recovered from demolished churches, hung on invisible wires. Overstuffed sofas, overstuffed chairs, overstuffed ottomans were casually placed to allow conversation, their cushions coordinated with the intricately patterned rugs. Everything, the essence of good taste: old-fashioned glamor toned down with burnished bronze mood lighting. Coltrane emanated from speakers I couldn't find so that it seemed like the walls themselves were jamming. And had Dr. Rivers chosen the ebony elephant on the mantle, pearls for eyes and tusks that could have been real ivory for all I knew? Was it an antique store find? Had he been abroad, stumbled across it in some dusty market? Or was it all mail ordered from the latest issues of fashionable catalogues?

I drank my first glass of shiraz a little too quickly, and Dr. Rivers raised his eyebrows when I revisited the wine bar for a second glass. "Enjoying yourself?" he asked, but I couldn't make out his tone: mocking or sincere? Perhaps he disapproved of my wine-drinking: not

savoring and sipping as one should. Perhaps he was feeling he shouldn't have invited me, though if he did, he was hiding it. I put on a brave smile, but poured liberally. He passed a tray of fresh mozzarella, basil, and tomatoes on melba toast, a snack so ubiquitous at those New Jersey parties that they struck me here as a cliché. "Have a bite," he offered. I took one from the tray, though I've always found fresh mozzarella to be utterly flavorless, and stepped back into the fray.

I stood on the fringe of a group of doctors I recognized from the hospital, though I'd never had much interaction with them, and laughed politely while they told lawyer jokes. I wished I had anything—anything at all—to talk about. I would rather take a hoof to the head than stand there like a fool. I'd heard most of the jokes before: "What's the difference between a porcupine and a Mercedes Benz full of lawyers?" (pause) "The porcupine has pricks on the outside." "What's the difference between a good lawyer and a great lawyer?" (pause) "A good lawyer knows the law. A great lawyer knows the judge." "What's the problem with lawyer jokes?" (pause) "Lawyer's don't think they're funny, and no one else thinks they're jokes." They were all too predictable to really laugh at, but the doctors laughed anyway. I wondered if this was a ritual of these parties: the bad jokes and polite laughter. I stood there, not knowing how to hold my arms, what facial expression I should adopt, whether I should press my way further into the conversation's circle instead of standing there on the outside, awkward and isolated.

I finished my second glass of wine and carried it to the long marble counters that stretched away from the sunken kitchen sink. Dr. Rivers stood by the Viking stove chatting with the Board members. I interrupted briefly to thank him for the invitation. He had asked me to stay longer: "You don't really have to go so soon?" I glanced at the older couple, surprised that he was neglecting such important guests to talk to me. I'd expected him to just nod off my

goodbye, releasing me from whatever duty I'd done. I mumbled something about being tired. Dr. Rivers laid his hand on the arm I'd folded across my chest: "well, thank you for coming," he said, and his eyes were momentarily a little too soft, like I had disappointed him somehow. Then, he rushed off to refill the wine glasses of the trustees, and I decided that I didn't care—or that I *hoped* I had disappointed him. He deserved it for putting me in this place where I so clearly didn't belong, playing my unnamed part.

*

Sunday, I rode Zephyr early, alone in the arena, then rode Foxfire with the girls. Just before lunchtime, I went to Rosauers to see if Timothy wanted to eat something, maybe something from the deli, on his break. I had called him late the night before, after coming home from Dr. Rivers's, and we'd stayed up late watching his bootlegged copies of Monty Python movies. Aside from knowing his appreciation of coconut horse hooves, outrageous French accents, and African/European swallow jokes, I knew no more about him than I had before. I resolved to reconcile myself to the fact that he might always be just a platonic friend, and that maybe that was the best after all. Friends didn't mess with my riding schedule and didn't mind manure stains on my pants. And platonic friends could still get fried chicken and jo jo potatoes to eat over cokes in a quiet super market corner. Still, I kept wondering what his hair would feel like in hand and how soft his lips would feel against my face. He had a quiet intelligence to him that worked on me like a gravitational pull, drawing me towards his long, lean body. Waiting in the express lane, a candy bar in hand to excuse my presence there, that's what I was thinking.

I hadn't noticed Dave as I walked through the store, hadn't seen him with his case of Bud and cheese doodles (his Sunday football supplies) coming towards the express lane behind me. I

hadn't known he was there, overhearing my words, when I asked Timothy if he wanted to grab a bite. I hadn't seen Dave's face blanch and then purple.

It was Timothy who saw all this, the preparation for the explosion. He saw the guy, unknown to him, set down his groceries and turn on his heel and he assumed the customer was merely irritated at the personal conversation. I saw Timothy's eyes flick that direction and back to me, but my gaze stayed on him, counting the dark eyelashes that framed his vision. I was aware of a presence, a heat, behind me, and later I would wonder if I should have known: the heat, familiar. But I was busy watching Timothy's wry smirk, so quickly suppressed, that played across his face when the heat drew away: the customer's reaction clearly overblown. He looked back at me. "I can get a break in a half hour if you want to swing back by." I nodded, gave him exact change for the candy, and walked out thinking about him.

I didn't know Dave was there until I'd just cleared the exit. I felt the grip of strong fingers on my forearm, pressing into the bruise from Zephyr's last bite, spinning me on my heels into his close face. "Who the fuck was that joker?"

My mind reeled, spinning from the harsh turn just as my dropped chocolate bar spun on the pavement. "What business is that of yours?"

Dave didn't speak for a moment.

"You think it isn't?" His voice, more like an animal growl than anything human. The bruise from Zephyr's bite ached and deepened under his hand. An older lady looked at us through photo-gray spectacles, their dark glass lightening in the shade of the awning. She hurried away, into the store. He pulled me into the sun, in the parking lot, in the middle of the store's fire lane, then spun me again toward him. "You can't do this, Joan. You can't."

"Let go of me."

“I fucking love you.”

“You’re married.”

“Yeah, and you’re fucking with her head, too.”

I had never seen Dave like this before. So *brutal*. Damn, he was tall. Bigger than I’d remembered him being. His shaggy hair hung over savage eyes which I could not read. The beat of my heart reverberated against my ribs. I ignored it. I focused on keeping my eyes harsh, generating the unforgiving squint of disdain. I tried to settle myself into my feet again, like I had that day in the hospital parking lot. I’d had control then, and I hoped I could do it again.

His fingers dug into the meat of my arm. I stared and he just stared right back at me, his eyes inscrutable. Then, he was pulling me again, dragging me through the parking lot. The publicity of it all shocked me as much as anything. In front of all to see. “Let the fuck go of me.” My voice was more desperate now, the underlying whine bothered me, the show of fear I couldn’t contain. I tried to think how to how to get the better of his superior strength. Nothing came to mind. I needed leverage. I thought of how this must have looked, of how I must have looked: so out of control and flailing. I struggled, but his fingers only dug deeper, gripping so tight that I began to fear they would break the skin and penetrate into my muscles themselves, sliding in between bicep and triceps. I tried to kick but nearly lost my balance, my feet skating across the blacktop’s skree. Behind us, a security guard ran out from the store. His tan polyester shirts, his brown pants, and his cheap badge were little more than a blur, but he must have been new. His body’s shape was unfamiliar.

Dave flung open the door of his truck and tried to stuff me into the seat, as if I were a sack of meal to be thrown over a mule’s back. The door bounced back on its hinges, and slammed into his shoulder. In that moment, I saw my chance, his attention momentarily divided.

And I took it. I kicked him in the balls with every ounce of strength my quads had to offer, glad of those days spent in the gym, those morning runs, the times I trained posting trot without stirrups.

I don't think I'd kicked a guy there since grade school, when it was little more than a game, an interesting anatomical curiosity. How the boys would crumple at the slightest blow! I thought of that now as I watched Dave fall. I'd heard that it's possible to kick a testicle so hard that the swelling causes it to rupture—a case a nurse had told me about when I first came to Jersey: an Italian man, his girlfriend's stiletto heel. I hoped that was true. I imagined it exploding like an overripe tomato. I hoped I'd, at the very least, I'd made him sterile. I hoped I'd struck hard enough that would make him think twice before fucking with me again.

“Don't you ever touch me,” I hissed, stepping over him.

The security guard slowed and halted, unsure what to do. I should have beckoned him on. I should have gone back to Timothy and told him everything. Maybe I should have called the police and gotten a restraining order, told them to start watching that guy, that he was dangerous. There were many things I could have done.

The cloud-free sky stretched high and far beyond them, beyond Rosauers, that concrete brick of a building. The autumn winds were starting to gust, rattling the drying leaves in their trees. I went to my truck, got in and drove. Back to my apartment, for now, for lack of a better destination.

My heart would not stop beating. It pounded within me. A primal drum. A cadence.

This would kill Jenny if she knew.

*

Like a horse pacing the walls of its loosebox, I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering aimlessly around my apartment. I played no music. I left the television off. I drank too much black coffee. I listened to the silence, trying to determine if there was anything here really worth staying for, or where I would go if I left. I didn't meet Timothy for his break, afraid that Dave would be there still, though I knew the fear was irrational.

Late in the afternoon, the phone rang. The bars of light stretched through the vertical blinds of the sliding door and yawned across my living room. I sat on my sofa, exhausted with thought, letting the bad spring dig into my shoulder for the first three rings. I picked up on the fourth only so I wouldn't have to answer the machine later.

Timothy's voice was worn and thin. "Is there something I should know about?"

Oceans of tiredness filled me. I felt their riptide pulling through my bones, dragging at me.

Timothy spoke again. "Jeff told me about the parking lot."

"Jeff?"

"Security."

I was quiet again for a moment. The effort to speak daunted me. Finally, before the silence could consume me, I spoke. "Do you really want to talk about this on the phone?" I said.

"No."

There was a long pause, and I volunteered nothing.

He broke first: "Do you want to go get something to eat?"

"Not particularly." My voice was level and emotionless.

Another pause. "Should I come over?"

I rubbed my fingers across my temple and over my burning eyes. “I would love it if you came over.”

I hung up and lay across my sofa, resting my head and feet on its broad, plaid arms, staring upwards. Dust clung within the crevices of my cottage cheese ceiling. A long, fuzz-coated strand of spider web hung from one of the air vents, gently waving in the seemingly still air of the apartment. An odd kind of metronome. I counted off seconds. Minutes. A quarter hour. A half.

Timothy’s knock on the door was quiet. Tentative, even. It had taken longer for him to get here than it should have. I wouldn’t ask why.

“Come in,” I said, not bothering to get up.

I turned to look at him as he pushed open the door. His face was shadowed by his wing-black hair. He didn’t look directly at me. Just moved to the easy chair and sank down in it as if dragged under by his own ocean.

For a long time, neither of us spoke. We just sat in the silence of my apartment, listening to the ambient noises of parking lot, the distant clatter of pots above us.

“So.” Timothy did not look at me as he spoke. “Who was that guy?”

I didn’t answer. I listened to the distant pots, the car doors. Why should I tell him anything? Who was this guy to me anyway, this guy who’d never made a real move, who kept his distance longer than he should have. Anger replaced tiredness. So many irritations: Dave, Zephyr, Dr. Rivers. I was feeling ugly; I couldn’t stifle the ugliness. “You’re a little old to be a college student, aren’t you?” I said.

Timothy stiffened. “A bit.” Again, silence, then, “I worked for a while before going back to school.”

“As a grocery checker?”

“In a casino.”

I thought about this. It softened me, knowing this small detail. “You must have seen a lot of bad characters.”

“Yep.”

“Was it depressing?”

“I hated it.”

I pictured him in a casino: white shirt, red vest, shuffling cards. I wondered how many Daves walked through such a place every day.

“It paid the bills, but it wasn’t worth it, that life. Seeing everyone so run down, and dealing them the hand that will run them down more.”

“So you came here.”

“Yep.”

“And got a job as a checker.”

“Got a job as a checker and then came back to school, actually. I worked at home for a year before I started school, after I decided I couldn’t take the casino another minute.” He scrutinized me a moment before continuing. “Financially, it wasn’t a smart move. Not for someone who had to save for school. I would have made more at the casino.” He unbuttoned the sleeves of his shirt and rolled them up over his sinewy forearms. “But I’d do it the same way again.”

“Oh.” I thought of Moscow, how small it could be sometimes. “Are you glad?”

“What?”

“Are you glad you came back to school?”

“Of course.”

I looked at him, trying to find the chink in his armor. “That was Dave earlier.” I looked away from him and back at the metronomic web. Its sway: one way, the other. “Dave was. Dave was a mistake.”

Silence, then, “I imagine so.”

“I met him when I first got back. At a bar one night. He didn’t seem so bad. He was lonely. I was lonely. We dated. We stopped dating.” I looked at Timothy looking at me. A lump was growing in my throat, but I choked it down. “It turned out he’d been married the whole time—two weeks, we lasted; he’d just forgotten to mention his wife until she got here. But then I met his wife—she started riding at my barn. What are the odds of that? So I see Dave all the time, or not all the time, hardly ever really, but too often.”

Timothy nodded. “He looked a little crazy today.”

“I’ve never seen him so bad.” I paused. “He came by work one day—crazy but not as crazy as he was today. He said he’d leave his wife for me, but I said I wasn’t interested. He did not take that well.”

“I imagine not.”

I shook my head and laughed now, though I didn’t feel like laughing and could not have said where the laugh was coming from. The laugh felt like panic. “I guess he’s pretty fucking smitten.” Then, I fought tears. I hated this: weakness. “Christ.” What would Timothy think of me, of not having told him about this before, of crying about it now: spilled milk.

Timothy stayed where he was and said nothing.

“You’re not married, are you?” I said.

“What, me?” Timothy laughed, then was silent for a moment and grew solemn. “I could have been, but I am not.” He swallowed. “A couple years back. A girl I was dating. It was pretty serious. She wasn’t too thrilled when I quit the casino and said I was going to go back to school. She’s part of the reason I didn’t come straight to school actually. Part of the reason I didn’t save more money. I thought for a month or so that I could convince her. By then, I’d missed spring enrollment and had to wait for fall. I had to sell my car to make the move. Which was fine. It was nothing but a piece of crap Dodge. Rusty on the fenders. It’s better to be here and be rid of it.”

I sat up on my couch and turned to face him, but said nothing.

“Maybe she made me a little gun shy,” he admitted.

“You loved her?”

Timothy shrugged. “Maybe,” and then, “yeah, I think so. She was a beautiful girl. And funny. I’d never met a girl so funny. I thought anyone who could joke like that must be pretty smart. Yeah, I loved her.”

“She didn’t love you back.” I don’t know why I said it. It was like I wanted to hurt him, like maybe my speaking the truth would make him realize it enough to get over her. For a minute, I thought he’d tell me to fuck off. I deserved that. My comment practically begged for it. But Timothy said nothing. He just looked at me with that steady gaze. Stoical or strong, I wasn’t sure. Maybe they were the same thing after all.

It was a shitty way to repay his honesty, but I kept talking. “If she had loved you, she would have wanted you to go to school.”

“I don’t know about that. What am I going to get out of it, after all? A history degree—it doesn’t exactly open up a whole bunch of career possibilities.” Timothy rose from the chair,

walked a small circle around the coffee table, and looked back at me. Then he smiled and plopped himself down next to me on the sofa. The outside seam of his jeans kissed the outside seam of mine.

“Me?” I said. “I went straight for the degree with the job prospects. Radiography. A couple years of school, starting salary 35K.” I nodded wisely, but he stayed quiet, so I balanced “wisdom” with truth: “good salary, though it probably won’t ever be great. I get raises, but there isn’t a whole hell of a lot of room for promotion. I’m kind of at the top, actually. I like my job, but it’s mostly just a job. It pays for the horse thing. Or, it pays enough that I can keep Foxfire. It doesn’t pay enough for me to compete with the best. It doesn’t pay enough to get me where I would like to be. But what would? If I worked a job that paid the money, it probably wouldn’t give me time to ride.” I was rambling, so I stopped.

“It’s a good job. You help people.”

“Yeah.” I thought about that, what everyone said. “Or not. I take pictures of people in pain, really, so that someone else can help them.”

“It’s part of helping. The doctor couldn’t do his work without you doing yours, right?”

Timothy moved his hand to my thigh and let it rest there. I ran my fingers over his. His hands were softer than mine: long fingers, nails clean and square. They were strong hands: lean but powerful, like the rest of him. I was glad he’d laid his hand on me. *Definitely being a boyfriend.*

But it was too late to be unreservedly happy. “What am I going to do about Dave?”

Timothy moved his hand to my head and stroked my hair.

I leaned my head on Timothy’s shoulder—less muscled than Dave’s had been, but more comforting. It seemed to fit my head in a way that Dave’s never had: he wasn’t so tall, it wasn’t

so bulky. My question hung in the air: what to do, what to do. Timothy took a deep breath and slowly exhaled it. “I have no idea.”

I sat up again and looked at Timothy. “I can’t let Jenny—that’s his wife—I can’t let her know.”

“Wait—is this the girl who cooked for her husband after they fought over money?”

“That’s her.”

“Huh.” He sat back and thought for a moment. “It might be the best thing for her in the long run.”

I thought again of Jennifer in high school, how I thought I was doing her a favor by telling her what a jerk her boyfriend was. He wasn’t even a good punk, not a smart punk or a sweet punk, not endearing in any possible way that punks could be—and I’d been attracted to my own share of bad boys. He was just a jerk punk. He was a burnout and a loser and hit on other girls behind her back. Every word I’d said had only made her cling to him more (*he’s just misunderstood; you don’t know him like I do; I never thought you’d be so judgmental...all the defenses I should have seen coming*); every word I said against him made her more distant from me, until there was no going back, until they went to that party on that night, until the crash, until she would never come back again.

“No,” I said. This was a different Jenny, a new Jenny, and I had a new chance. I wouldn’t repeat my mistakes. You couldn’t just tell people shit like that—that their husband was a cheating slime—and not expect an emotional fall out. Jenny, so thin, so pale. “It would be too much for her. You don’t understand how she worships that guy.”

It was stupid how much better I started to feel, with Timothy sitting by my side, petting me. It changed nothing.

Timothy looked me in the eye. “Should I talk to him?” He stroked my hair. “I will if you want me to.”

I shook off the suggestion. “I think that would make things worse.” I turned to the blank screen of the television, as if it could offer a solution. “No, but I’ll probably have to.” I sighed. “I’ll call him tomorrow and see if I can make him understand, once and for all, that I am out of the picture. That I am not going to be won over.”

“I hate to tell you this, Joan, but he was pretty much beyond that today. That guy was totally psycho.”

Timothy was right, of course. Stuffing a woman in his truck was not the act of a rational man. I wished I could paint my apartment red, spray paint HELL on the mailbox in uneven black letters, wait on the eaves with a long whip. How I’d lash out when he appeared, beating him away, once and for all, when he tried to get near me. The credits would roll. It would all be over.

I ran through other options. “I won’t tell Jenny,” I said. “I can’t talk to the police because then she’d know and it wouldn’t do any good anyway.”

“It would keep you safe.”

“Yeah, right.” The truth was, I didn’t know anything about restraining orders. I didn’t even know if my situation would qualify for one. All I knew was the horror stories that occasionally made their way into my ER: the mother whose ribs were systematically cracked in front of her kids, the ex-girlfriend beaten faceless, all in spite of the paperwork that was supposed to protect them. I had no faith in the power of paper. “Restraining orders don’t protect jack. They only matter once they’re broken, and they don’t matter much then.”

Timothy shrugged, conceding the point.

“I won’t talk to Jenny.” I thought a moment. “I won’t talk to Jenny, but maybe I’ll talk to Dawn. She’s my friend from the barn—she’s known me a long time, she’s good with a secret, and she knows Dave and Jenny both. Maybe she’ll know what the heck I should do.”

We sat silently for minutes, his hand rubbing circles on my knee. I sighed. In spite of all that was wrong, I felt content. We sat like this for minutes before he turned his head toward mine. I looked at him, at the battle in his eyes.

When Timothy kissed me, it wasn’t like fireworks or coming home or any of the things that kisses are supposed to be like. It wasn’t *like* anything. His warm hand against my cheek, his breath mingling with mine: kissing Timothy was only like kissing Timothy.

My shoulders and elbows unlocked. Until that last unconscious muscle tension relaxed, I didn’t realize how strongly I’d been resisting. Odd, how the body can fight and the mind not know. Relief filled me from its hidden spring, flooding upward from my feet. Timothy: one thing I no longer would fight. When I twisted my fingers through his hair, it was exactly as I knew it would be: the silk of it cooler than water.

CHAPTER 4

LIGHTENING THE FOREHAND

The autumn winds began to blow and blow—they were early that year. The wind had made this land, lifting silt from Montana, the Dakotas, who knew where else, and carrying it here. Over millennia, it settled over the flat basalt in ever-growing hills that, from the big sky, look like the rippled bottom of a creek bed. The dust: just another migrant from the east seeking home.

Sowed with wheat and rape and legumes, the soil becomes a home for rooted things. Peas and lentils thrive. Farmers frown at the sky often, trying to determine what it will do: whether the wind will bring clouds when they need rain, whether it will blow them away when they don't, but the wind is generous.

Generous, but undeniably aggressive. This wind will uproot aged pines and bring them crashing down—on cars, on houses, empty or peopled. It blows with the force of fate and fury. It whips at your face: your hair, its lash. Its restlessness, infectious.

Sunday was a calm day: the first in days, and perhaps the last for weeks. Dave had left messages twice that week, begging me to pick up the phone. I'd also had two hang-ups, and I suspected those were also him. I considered changing my number, but the new number would be posted on Foxy's stall door, the emergency contact, where Dave could get it if he didn't get it directly from Jenny. There was no escape. Several nights, I'd seen his truck parked at the end of my block when I came home from the barn, driving into my apartment's parking lot, him watching me, making sure I went home, making sure no one else came with me. I'd called

Timothy and told him to give me some space until I got things straightened out, afraid to set Dave off again.

I still hadn't talked to Dawn. I rehearsed bringing up the subject of Dave, I imagined Dawn's reaction to a hundred openings, but I couldn't bring myself to say the words. I couldn't imagine what she would think.

And then, there was the added stress of Dr. Rivers always looking over my shoulder at work. He'd come in Monday to ask why I hadn't stayed longer at the party, expressing his disappointment that we hadn't had a chance "to chat." Weird, weird behavior from a man who'd always treated me with cold reserve if not hostility. Now, he seemed to want me to believe he was kind. I imagined this was the side of him his patients saw: the concerned looks, the non-committal, non-intrusive pats on the arm. He laid his hand on my shoulder when he talked to me that week; the lightness of the touch tentative and foreign. All the while, Cheryl, *still* not talking to me, watched our every interaction, as if there was more to each that must be uncovered. And maybe there was, because on Thursday when I addressed him, as usual, as Dr. Rivers, he told me to please call him John. Since then, afraid I'd be accused of leading him on, I'd become more than usually icy in my dealings with him—not that I'd ever been warm. I answered questions in grunts and shrugged shoulders. I didn't look him in the eye. I tried to think of ways to casually mention my new boyfriend, but nothing came to mind.

I tacked up Zephyr that Sunday morning, leaving Foxy pacing in his stall. The mare had become more subtle about her violence, less openly aggressive. The rate at which she learned was frightening. She was a more intelligent horse even than Foxfire, a difficult thing to admit. Yet, unlike Foxfire's, her intelligence worked against our training. She thought to find the best

evasion, or, as now, she stood and watched for the moment my guard would drop and she could use her teeth and hooves to their most savage effect.

I had doubts about taking her out of the barn (so many unknowns, her response to my commands so rebellious and erratic), but after the incidents with Dave and Dr. Rivers, I was feeling a little reckless. I wanted to test her, to see what she'd do. I hadn't spoken to Eddie about taking her on the trail; I didn't know if he had tried taking her out yet. I didn't call to find out, afraid he'd disapprove. I figured it was all training, and she needed it, so he couldn't object as long as nothing happened. And if she left me laid out on some loamy field, so be it. At least that was a problem whose solution I knew.

We had made a little progress, but precious little. Wednesday, I had managed to give her a carrot without losing any fingers. She took it with a quick dart toward my hand and pulled away, as if I would follow the carrot with a blow. It frustrated me, her reaction. I was not asking a lot of her—just a little of her power and speed. In return, I offered grain, carrots, a pasture to run in, a good and easy life. I would pick the shit from her hooves and wash it from her tail. All she had to give me was an hour of control, an hour of her power and speed.

Dawn had raised an eyebrow when I led Zephyr into the barn, Foxfire whinnying at the end of the aisle, but she said nothing. Dawn just looked at me, sighed audibly, and groomed trusty old Sunny. As for Jenny, she was too absorbed with the fact that she'd be trying a horse with Eddie later that afternoon to pay too much attention to which horse I was grooming, seemingly oblivious to everything around her, including the piercing screams that echoed from Foxfire's stall when he realized I was tacking another horse. Even so, I noticed that both Dawn and Jenny gave me plenty of room when we mounted—and even more a moment later when Zephyr aimed a kick at Zip's shoulder.

For the first fifteen minutes or more, no one spoke. We waited for Zephyr to explode. She insisted on being in front of the other horses, and, not wanting to pick that fight on our first day out, I let her lead the pack. As soon as she was in front, she relaxed slightly. Her ears still strained towards every sound, and her body felt tense under the saddle—almost quivering—but she didn't dance and she didn't spook. Even when a quail dashed out from the ditch and practically under her hoof, she merely snorted and stomped her foot down, forcing the bird's quick turn on light feet and sending it dashing back to the ditch. So focused was she on the outside world, that she gave to the bit more than she ever had in the arena, working it between teeth and tongue, salivating like a dressage horse.

Dawn began chatting. "So, Joan, what's the story with that guy? Did you ever ask him out?"

"Yeah," said Jenny. "Tell us more about what's happening with Mr. Grocery Store."

My throat constricted. "Nothing." I glanced back at Dawn, wondering if she could hear my lie. Sunny's head low and his step shuffling. "He must be on a different shift or something. I haven't seen him."

"That *stinks*," Jenny said. I turned to her and noticed that she was allowing Zip to come into kicking range again.

"You might want to keep clear of her feet a little more."

She checked Zip. "Even Dave was asking about you, saying he was surprised you didn't have a boyfriend. I was sure the grocery guy would turn into something."

I shrugged but kept my eyes forward, afraid of what they might reveal. "It just wasn't meant to be, I guess." I thought of Timothy, the silk of his hair, his softer lips. And then I thought of Dave, and how I needed him to think I was alone so that he would leave me alone. It

irritated me that I couldn't even talk honestly with my friends: Jenny, his unwitting spy. "It's cool. I like being single," I said.

Dawn groaned. "You don't *do* anything about being single. You never go on dates. You haven't even had one since you got back from New Jersey, and it's been months now—almost a year. And guys throw themselves at you."

"They do not."

Dawn turned to Jenny. "Whenever I go out with her, half the guys in the place are staring, and she doesn't even notice."

Jenny laughed.

She was exaggerating of course, but I didn't correct her; Dawn would only become more dogmatic if I did.

Being single means never having to explain yourself, I thought. But I didn't say it, didn't rub my lie any further in than I already had. Instead: "So, Jenny, what's this horse you're looking at today?" I looked back at her, sitting suddenly taller on Zip and causing him to tense slightly in expectation of some command he would try to evade.

"He's a quarter horse out in Lewiston."

"Color?" asked Dawn.

"Bay."

I had always wanted a bay—a nice blood bay with gleaming red flanks and a jet black mane and tail.

Jenny continued. "He's not quite sixteen hands, but Eddie says that's big enough for me. He's an older horse. Fourteen. But he jumps three feet without hesitation and Eddie thinks he

might go as high as three six when I'm more confident—and he's been trained to second level dressage, so, if I get him, maybe I'll try to do a little eventing."

Not impressive by other standards, but you would be hard pressed to find a horse with a better resume in this part of the country. Horses here were far more likely to barrel race or cut cattle than they were to jump.

"What's his name?" I said.

"Hobbes."

I knew the horse—Pam Westerfelt's horse. I guessed this meant she was buying Eddie's Winston, moving up. I couldn't have afforded Winston, but I was still a little jealous that Pam was getting him. And jealous of Jenny for getting her hand me down. But all I said was, "Good horse. Sensible." A bit of a fireplug in terms of looks—in comparison to Zephyr and Foxfire anyway. The comparison was unfair. I didn't really want Hobbes, I reminded myself; certainly, he was the right horse for Jenny. A more willing horse than Zip by a long way, one not likely to duck out on a fence and leave Jenny laid out, head spinning. He'd be a good horse to learn to event on. Better, perhaps, than even Foxy had been. I thought back to that broken collar bone, the unprovoked spook. Hobbes was more dependable in unknown terrain. And Hobbes could blow the average Idaho hunting class away with the training Pam and Eddie had put into him: his balance, his perfect striding, his calm demeanor. But for me? I wanted more from a horse than just an easy ride.

"Is Dave going with you to look him over?" Dawn asked.

Jenny's face blanched, almost imperceptibly in the late morning sun, but still I saw it.

"Dave," she cleared her throat, "Dave's been acting a little weird lately."

I studied her face, but it revealed nothing. I remembered the night at my apartment, how long it took her to tell me about her fight with Dave. She played her emotions close to the chest, this girl. “Weird in what way?” I needed to know, and I didn’t want to hear.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s probably nothing. He went out for snack food before football last weekend and came home in a *mood*. He said some guy had cut him off on the road, said the guy practically killed him. But he didn’t have any of the beer or stuff he was supposed to get, and he never watches the game without a beer. He’s been snippy ever since.”

“That’s really weird. Where else would he go on a Sunday?” Dawn glanced at me and then at her. “You don’t think there’s someone else, do you?”

“For Dave? No. Dave loves me. Besides, he was only gone for, like, twenty minutes—that wouldn’t be much of an affair.” Jenny laughed, but her laugh rang false. “It’s probably something from work. He’s always stressing about the guys not respecting him, but he won’t let me talk to Daddy, and he won’t talk to him either.”

Another thing she had on him, I thought: the job he’d lose, the money. It wasn’t like he could go do something else. He hadn’t finished his degree, and he wasn’t qualified for the job he had. He was just Daddy’s foreman, job security as long as he treated Jenny right. He was trapped, something in my favor, so long as he acted somewhat rationally. He had to keep things good with Jenny if he wanted to keep the money rolling. He surely would, if I didn’t provoke him. He had too much to lose, I told myself. Assuming he didn’t *want* to lose it. My stomach turned.

I had to get out of there, away from Jenny and talk about Dave. Sunny swung a little close to Zephyr’s haunches, and she aimed a kick at his side. Dawn saw it coming and pulled away just in time to avoid the hoof that would otherwise have hit dead center on her thigh.

“I’m going to run her a bit,” I said. “See if I can’t get some piss and vinegar out of her.”

Without waiting for a response, I asked for a canter, and after three good, balanced strides (the best I’d felt on her), turned her to jump the bank that paralleled the road. It was a relatively short bank—a little over two and a half feet at that point. We cleared it at an angle, with feet to spare, powerful and round, a perfect jump. I heard Dawn’s faint “yahoo” follow me over the bank, and then all I could hear was wind as we galloped over the field, a true hand gallop. My God, she was fast! A blood horse, a racing thoroughbred: her legs extended themselves in impossible strides. Zephyr, indeed; we were the wind. I looked to the horizon, ever distant. Zephyr’s breath came in oxygen-rich snorts, cadenced to her stride. Our fused body was something mythological, something more than centaur; an unwritten thing, beyond physical possibilities: wind and blood and bone without corporeal limitations. We flew, hooves seeming to hit the earth simultaneously during the incremental nanoseconds between our stretching bounds. We skimmed along the earth’s uppermost crust. Ethereal.

I squeezed the right rein gently, turning her uphill. My own breath was coming in gasps, the muscles of my legs working in time with hers to maintain my balance. My lungs burned in my chest as if my legs were the ones doing the sprinting. I gently pulled Zephyr back, and she slowed with the incline of the hill, remembering only then to fight a little, tossing her head against the bit. Up the steepening incline, we went from gallop to canter to trot to jog, then turned and walked back to the girls. I gave her some rein and she dropped her head low, sides heaving under my thighs. It took minutes to get back within sight of the girls. I waved when I saw them trotting over the field towards us. They waved back, and I could make out their faces, smiling—no, beaming. I was smiling, too, uncontrollably. This was joy. This feeling.

Jenny laughed. “I’ve never seen a horse move so fast!”

My cheeks hurt with smiling. I only nodded. Adrenaline pounded in my blood vessels, the capillaries expanding with its surges.

“No kidding.” Dawn’s voice was pitched high with her enthusiasm. “She’s a bitch on wheels—but damn, what wheels!”

Zephyr snapped at Zip, whose head was nearly in range of her teeth, but the snap was half hearted. I turned her, both of us panting to catch breath, and we continued our ride. Though we never went faster than a walk all the rest of the way home, I floated on the power of that round jump, the rhythmic pull of those enormous strides. Talent. Eddie was right. This horse had something, if we could get to it, if we could make her trust us. This horse could be my ticket. I didn’t ask to what, and I didn’t ask how much time I’d have before she was sold to the highest bidder.

As we came back to the barn, I pushed her slightly off one leg then the other, asking for lateral movements: a leg yield right, a leg yield left. She moved grudgingly, walking sideways but trying to lead with her nose rather than her shoulder, not wanting to curve around my leg. A couple strides of good leg yield. I stopped to praise her and she turned to try and bite my toe again. I only laughed.

And when I pulled off her saddle in the barn’s cooler air, steam rose from her back and I noticed that the muscles were filling in even more over her withers and through her haunches. I groomed her and managed to avoid teeth and hooves. Foxy paced at the aisle’s end, nickering for me to come get him, his nickers hoarse from the earlier screaming.

Eddie pulled in as I was leading Zephyr back to her paddock. I turned and led her up to his open passenger window. He had surely noticed that she’d worked. Despite careful

grooming, her fall-thick coat showed the sweat marks, the rippling of dried salt, that come from a hard autumn ride. “How’s our girl?” was all he said.

“She’d good. Better than good. I hope you don’t mind, but I took her out in the fields today.”

Eddie was impassive. “And?”

“And we should work her out there more often. I think it’s good for her—it was like she had more to concentrate on than me, so she could yield a bit.”

Eddie looked at his mare. I realized that I had dropped my guard, that in my excitement to tell him of our success, I was holding her on a loose line, as I would have held Foxy. She hadn’t bitten me. Instead, her ears were perked and her gaze was off on the hills behind us.

“I’ll put her back, and we can talk more if you want.”

Eddie shook his head. “No, just put her back. I’ve got to get Miss Jennifer to Lewiston to check out this horse.” He looked me in the eye. “I’m glad you took her out. You two seem to have made some progress today. But next time, you call me first, ok?”

“Sure thing. I’m sorry I didn’t today. It was a split second decision.”

Eddie merely nodded, and I led Zephyr back, euphoria still infusing the world despite Eddie’s chastening reminder: Zephyr was his horse, not mine. Jenny and he pulled out as I re-entered the barn.

Foxfire felt a little older and stiffer under saddle after the ride on Zephyr, his legs stocked up from the cool night spent in the stall. I chided myself for comparing her youthful movement with his aged and arthritic trot. I tried to remember how he used to move. His canter had been as rhythmic and comfortable as a child’s rocking horse. People used to tell me they just liked *watching* him move, his textbook stride: a canter so good it gave a vicarious thrill. But now he

leaned and tripped in that gait, guarding his hind legs from the pain. I hadn't asked him for a canter in months.

*

Home again, I showered. The desire to see Timothy was becoming consuming. All week, I'd been thinking of him, wanting to touch him again, to feel his hand resting on my thigh, to feel his lips warm on mine, our breath mixing. I thought of the way he looked at the ground, smiling, when he recalled happy memories, and the way he looked me straight in the eye when he told more serious ones, as if it were important that I experience the memory just as he was re-experiencing it. It was as if his eyes could transmit gravity, solemnity, all through the depth of their color or the dilation of the pupil.

I wondered what he thought of me—the distance I was keeping. He hadn't put up much of a fight when I told him I couldn't see him for a while, but I could hardly fault him for that, for giving me what I'd asked for. But part of me wished he had refused to listen to the sensible course. Part of me wished that his desire to see me would overcome my requested time apart. What kind of madness was that? The refusal to listen to better judgment, the failure to balance reason and passion: these were the problems that had gotten me into trouble with Dave.

I decided I would call Timothy later that afternoon. Phone cradled to ear, his voice would warm me while his touch could not. I might ask him if he wanted to come eat dinner with me at my parents' house, neutral territory where Dave would not follow. I would pick him up at five, I decided. Nothing to worry about: by then, I thought, Jenny would be home from her test ride and Dave would be occupied, hearing all about the ride on the new horse. Of course she'd buy him. Hobbes was perfect for her—so fancy and able in comparison to Zip that her little head would spin.

It should have occurred to me that, Jenny away, an afternoon alone left Dave free to bother me, but it didn't—not until I heard the pounding fist on my front door, the monosyllable of my name moaned loud, "Joan, Joan," as a dying cow might low. *The neighbors*, I thought. I put the chain on the door and turned the knob, his weight against the door flinging it taugt against the metal so hard it sparked.

"What the fuck is your problem?" I hissed through the door.

He laughed at this. "You. I can't stop thinking of you."

I edged back, his face pressed against the door's narrow opening, the reflected gold tint of the chain stippling his face yellow. Bourbon hung in the air like a halo around him. I gazed at his door-crushed, gold-speckled face, conscious of how much of my body he could see; how little I could see of him. "This is sick." I said. "This is obsession."

His eyes were somber now. "Don't you remember what it was like, those two weeks? We had so much fun, just talking and sitting around your apartment. You understood me. You could talk about intelligent things: politics, science. You respected me. No one does that now." His face momentarily pulled back into shadow. "The guys at work think I'm a joke."

"Jenny doesn't think you're a joke."

"You don't know anything about Jenny." His voice was thick with alcohol and warning.

"I know she's perfectly sweet. I know she dotes on you. You're all she talks about."

"I'm just a tool to her. A way to get money out of Daddy."

"That's totally unfair."

Again, he pressed his face into the opening. "Is it? You think she could work as her Daddy's foreman? You think I'd still be around if she could?"

"She worships you."

“Maybe.” Again, he backed a half-step into shadow.

“You’re all she talks about,” I said, trying to press my advantage.

“Yeah,” he laughed again, that scary laugh. “Yeah, I’m all she talks about at home, too. She doesn’t have another thought in her head. Do you know how boring that is? Or she talks about you and the horses. I don’t know which is worse: torture or boredom.”

“It can’t be that bad.” But I could imagine how it would be. I felt my feet take a step towards the door.

“You don’t know how bad it is.” His face was pressed in the opening again, distorted and colored by fury. “My life is Jenny or Jenny’s father. Home, work. I can’t get away. I never wanted this life, and now I’m trapped.”

“Bullshit.” My voice was low and slightly soft, its edge blunted. I tried again: “Jesus Christ. Stop feeling so sorry for yourself. If you hate your life, do something about it.”

“Damn it,” he slammed a fist against the door. It reverberated against its chain, and I wondered how long the screws were that held that chain in place. Did they run only through the trim molding or did they penetrate deeper, into the timbers of the door frame itself? I hoped they were long, that they would hold. He approached the door again, his voice softened now, pleading. “Don’t you see that I’m trying to do something about it? If you would come with me, I could have another life. I could go to school again. U of I—or anywhere, any school. I could have a job with people who thought, who cared about more than whether a two by six was needed or a two by four might work. I could have a job I actually knew a fucking thing about, so that I wasn’t such a joke. I could make something of myself. I could make a life for us—a good life.”

“You don’t need me for any of that.”

“Don’t I?” He paused a moment to clear the smoke from his voice. “If you’re not there, then what’s the point? If you’re not there, I might as well stay with Jenny and keep living this miserable life.”

I tried to think a way through this logic, a way to make him go home. “Dave, you can’t have a life with me. How would that even work, Jenny and her dad still here in town, how awkward would that be?”

“She’d go home. We’d never seen them. Or, better still, we could leave.”

I took another step toward the doorway, resting my hand on the knob. “But she’d still exist. And even if she didn’t, do you really think I could be with you after all this? This is crazy. You’re acting crazy.”

“But that would change when we were together. I’d be happy. We’d both be happy.”

“No we wouldn’t.”

“Yes.”

“No. People aren’t happy. That’s just how it is. We always want something more.” The chain was level with my eyes, strained against its bolts, one slip away from everything changing.

He was quiet.

“You have Jenny, and she loves you. I don’t. I can’t. I have my own life to live, and you have to let me go. I don’t love you.” The gold played over Dave’s tan face, and I thought of Timothy. The gold of his eyes calmer than the gold now lighting Dave’s cheek. I wondered what Timothy would do to love me, if he decided he did love me. How far would he be willing to go? What would I do for him? When was it ok to be passionate, to risk everything?

Dave’s eyes were half-hidden in shadow. “Unlock the door and let’s talk.”

I backed a step. “No fucking way.”

“You’re all I’ve been thinking about for months now. At first, I thought I could live with it—our affair being a brief thing. But then, at dinner at the Mexican place, and since then, hearing about you from Jenny. Every day is worse than the last.”

“You need help, but I can’t give it to you.”

He snorted a brief laugh. “No one can help me.”

“Help yourself. Go see a doctor. Leave Jenny. Whatever you need to do, do it. But I’m no part of that.”

The door started to shake on its hinges, and I realized he was sobbing, the muscled bulk of him resting against the thin door. “Can’t we just talk?” his voice was little more than a whisper.

I didn’t answer at first. I stared at the dark edge of doorway. I worried again for Jenny, how strange he could be, his violence. Had he hit her? How did his frustration manifest when it wasn’t manifesting in my doorway?

“Joan?”

“Dave, go home. Watch the game. We can avoid each other. Move on.”

He sighed. “I can’t do that.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Just talk to me.”

“No.”

It went on like that for several more minutes, but something had changed. The bourbon had mellowed within him, or maybe it was me, my voice, my words, that finally began to convince him. Eventually, he did leave, weaving from the parking lot in his truck. I watched him pulled out from behind the safety of my vertical blinds.

I called Timothy. “You’ll never guess who was just here,” I said when he answered.

“Joan?”

“Yeah.” I smiled, glad to hear a voice so calm.

“Listen.” He paused. His voice was quiet, like he was whispering, trying not to be overheard. “It’s not a good time to talk.”

My smile fell. “Sorry, I was just calling to see if you wanted to have dinner at my parents?”

“I’m not sure I can tonight.” It was then that I heard a sound in the background. Another voice in his apartment. A female voice. I couldn’t make out what she said, but she was talking to him. The tone sounded flirtatious, but perhaps I reading too much into nothing. “I’ll call you tomorrow?” he said.

I couldn’t speak. I thought of his ex—the one he’d wanted to marry. I dropped the phone into its cradle and sunk into my sofa. Something in the air: everyone getting back together with their old loves. I tried to imagine her, the woman Timothy had nearly given up everything for, hurt to remember that there was a woman whom he’d loved like that. Was she good looking? Did she dress well? Had he fallen for her right away, or had it taken time? I imagined her running long fingernails through his hair, running soft hands across his chin, kissing and kissing him. I sat there for an hour, my body distanced and distancing from my thoughts. I stared at my hands, far at the ends of my arms. I looked at their dirt-stained calluses, their pronounced whorls, the bitten and broken nails. The knuckles showed the sun damage, the elephant skin of a lady much older than my twenty-six years. Who would want to be touched by hands like these? Rough, scaled hands. What man in his right mind would put up with a woman who spent most of her day at work or at the barn, who couldn’t give him her undivided attention?

I could put on a red dress and heels, fix my hair and fix my face, twirl and dance and flirt, but still: my rough hands would give me away. I wasn't meant for that kind of life, was I? Destiny was in the hands, or so the palm readers said. I wasn't meant for dating and romance. I wasn't a character in a dime-store novel. I had another fate. Or would have had, if Foxy hadn't gotten old. Or Zephyr, if Eddie wouldn't sell her as soon as she'd trained up. If I had money or could get it—real money, not the stuff I made at the hospital. Wealth.

Ifs, ifs. I couldn't lead the life I felt I was destined for any more than any other life.

I rose and went to my truck. The whining roar of the aging belts as the engine turned over was a cry of anguish, a cry I would not make but that I wanted to feel, a cry that I could resonate with. I drove to the barn, empty now, and groomed Foxfire. At every stroke, his coat glowed redder, rich with its oils, like something burnished, like something burning with its own flame. First, he leaned into the soft brush; then, he leaned into me, resting his broad blaze against my chest while I stroked the soft brush behind his ears, where he most liked to be petted. Finally, as I moved to brush his neck again, he rested his heavy head on my shoulders, his windpipe warm against the side of my neck, sending rhythmic puffs of hot breath across my back. It was how horses warmed members of their herd. Me: I was more like something mechanical. At every stroke of the brush, I thought: this is who I am, this is what I do, this is what I care about, this is who I am.

I repeated the words again and again until I could remember.

*

That night, I drove over the mountain. My parents had a fire going in the wood stove, warming the house. Mom was on the sofa, the sofa we'd had forever. The patchwork slipcover that she'd made years before now softened by time and the slow wear of bodies. It was

becoming threadbare at the seams, the batting visible under thinning fabric. I collapsed next to her, tracing the pink vines in my favorite bit of calico with my fingers. “You look tired,” she said.

“Tired of this town.” I looked at her in the warm lamplight and firelight, her knitting needles busy in hand, and thought of how often I’d seen her just like this: her wild hair frizzing away, glowing with fire. Calm within her flame, but her thoughts far away. I wondered what she was thinking, just as I’d always wondered. This was how it always was. Home: the place where nothing ever changes. I surprised myself by saying, “I’m thinking of moving again.”

My mother said nothing. Her knitting needles kept going, but her eyes were reading me, deciphering my expression, my eyes, the slope in my shoulders, my casual hands.

“Maybe not so far this time,” I said. I hadn’t ever understood New Jersey, and it hadn’t understood me. I didn’t want that again. Where could I go? “Maybe I’ll stay. I don’t know.”

“What’s wrong, Joannie?” Mom put her hand on my knee and rubbed it.

“Oh, nothing really.” I didn’t want to tell Mom about Dave, not now. What would she think of her daughter, the adulteress? “I’m just feeling a little stuck.”

“At the hospital?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t exactly moving up the chain of command there either. “Sort of. Not really.” I sighed. I had to tell her something. “I met this guy, and I really like him, but I think he may be getting back together with his old fiancée.”

“You wouldn’t leave town over a guy, would you?” My mom’s voice constricted with concern.

“No. But I won’t stay for one either.”

“But that’s not the reason you came back or the reason you’ve stayed, right? A guy?”

My mother’s lips pursed and relaxed.

“No.” I answered too quickly. I looked at my mom looking at me. Her brown eyes were as unreadable to me as they’d always been. I suddenly felt interrogated. I didn’t really want to get into all this, but since I had, I sighed again and went through the litany: “I came back because this is home, and because I hate humidity, and because I understand how people work here better than I do anywhere else. I came back and I stayed because I missed you and Dad, and because I missed the barn here, where board is affordable enough so I can put some money by for my next horse but, more than that, because women at the barn here don’t import their horses from Europe, don’t drive Lexus SUVs, and don’t complain about their husbands or their brokers, neither of whom pay enough attention to them. I came back because this is where I am supposed to be. I may not quite fit in” (*girls from small towns in Idaho don’t ride for the Team*) “but at least I understand how I don’t fit in, and the ways I don’t fit in here make sense to me.”

“So what does any of that have to do with men?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” I smiled, and my mom smiled in return. She patted me on the shoulder and rose to help my father in the kitchen. I sat a while longer. I was staying, of course. Where else would I go to, even if I’d wanted to go? I reminded myself that I wasn’t a person to run from my problems. I just had to figure out how to face them.

Pilate nudged his cold nose under my hand, and I slid to the floor to pet him. His fur was soft and clean as always, though perhaps a little coarser now than it had been when he was a pup. He looked at me without absolute adoration and trust, like he knew I’d always come back to pet him.

My thoughts strayed to Timothy: I reminded myself that I was overreacting to what I had heard. It could have been any girl's voice. It could have been perfectly innocent. But Timothy's voice, his tone: it was her. They were talking. So what did that mean? It didn't mean anything. Except that she was there, that she'd come to see him. This girl who'd meant so much to him. And wouldn't she be a fool to give him up? If it came to a choice between her and I, he'd choose her. He'd have to. She was the one he knew, he loved, he was passionate for: we'd already established that. I was just another possibility, and one who'd pushed him away when I most felt the need for him.

I went into the kitchen. My dad was layering lasagne noodles with his famous tofu, feta, spinach blend and a thick ladling of Marinara. Mom grated mozzarella and parmesan for the top. I watched their shoulders as they worked, the muscles that flexed and released. "You guys need any help?"

My father glanced at me. "Depends. Do you want garlic bread?"

"Do you really need to ask?"

Dad nodded towards the butcher block to a stick of butter, a garlic bulb and a loaf of French bread that appeared to have been baked that morning. I peeled several cloves, mashed them under the flat of my knife with a swift fist, and finely diced the pulp. It felt good to be smashing something. I beat the butter and garlic together in a small bowl. The bread knife slid through the loaf with the ease only a good knife provides, and again, I found myself relishing the functional violence of cooking.

*

Monday, I did something I never do: I took a sick day. I couldn't quite seem to face work after that weekend. It was weakness, and I knew it. I faked a cough and told Cheryl I was

ill. Hannah would have to cover for me. I covered for her from time to time, so I felt little guilt. I imagined Dr. Rivers on his rounds, noting my absence. Perhaps he'd be concerned. Perhaps my absence would just confirm whatever it was he had, until recently, always suspected me of. I didn't know what to make of his gestures towards flirting. Or were they merely friendliness—an overzealous response to the check I'd given him that day in the ER when he dared to question the quality of my work.

The morning stretched before me like a lazy cat. After a mid-morning jog and some french toast, I drove myself to the barn and tacked up Zephyr. She walked calmly now on the lead rope, but still looked for opportunities to bite and kick. I found myself beginning to admire her for this: for her unremitting savagery. Whatever damage had been inflicted on her in the past (whatever her past entailed), she had not lost the will and ability to protect herself. I needed a good dose of Zephyr, I thought. When Dave was around, I needed that sense of power and self-preservation. I had to remember that determination: he could never really get me while I still had the ability to fight. And Zephyr had won, hadn't she? Her previous owners, whatever they done to her, had eventually given up on bottling her ability because she, despite everything they had thrown her way, had simply and forcefully said no.

Of course, there was damage. I would admit that. Zephyr would not be the horse she might once have been able to be. She would always bite and kick. Horses with such confirmed habits did not give them up easily, but I could live with them—at least, I could live with them as they were now, toned down as they were by time, training, and consistency.

We did our homework: circles, transitions, the ring work she still needed. She was coming along well. Her butt had become rounded with muscle, the bones no longer jutted so disturbingly, her neck had filled and began to show a natural arc as her top line developed.

Because of the added neck muscle, she gave to the bit more now, less sore and less stiff. Her trot was steady and scopey, her legs reaching endlessly with each stride. Rhythmic. Even if she didn't succeed as a jumper, her movement would have fitted her for a decent career in the dressage ring, though I doubted her temperament would stand it. Her trot was more comfortable to ride than Foxfire's had ever been: less jolting, easier to sit. Her canter was almost as nice as his had been. She could move, this mare, at all gaits.

Heavy wheels crunched on the gravel outside the barn—a truck, weighted with something. The engine cut. Car doors. Voices I couldn't quite make out. The screech of rusted metal opening. Hooves. The barn door slid open: light, shadows. Then, Eddie, leading Hobbes into the barn, Jenny following.

“Hey there,” I called, announcing myself. Eddie and Jenny looked over.

“Hey yourself,” Eddie called back. “And how's our girl today?”

“A champ. I doubted you when you said a show by spring, but I think she'll be ready.” I asked for a few more transitions: halt to trot to walk to trot to halt. I looked at Eddie again.

“She's smart, this one.”

Eddie snapped Hobbes into the cross ties and sent Jenny to get Connie so they could figure out where Hobbes would live. I guessed that Zip would be put back out with the herd now that he wasn't being leased any more, and Hobbes would get his stall. “Vet check already done?” I asked.

“This morning. Pam offered to let Jenny start the trial period today and we took her up on it.”

“Two week trial?”

“Yep.” Eddie stroked Hobbes. The gelding was better looking than I remembered. Even after a half hour ride in the trailer on dusty roads, his coat shone. A blood bay: red as mahogany with equal luster. A little too beefy to be elegant, but an athletic horse nonetheless. If Zephyr was ready to compete in the spring shows, I suddenly realized, chances were Jenny and Hobbes would be our competition. I might lose to Jenny. Jenny!—so new to the sport but on such a reliable horse, such a good horse, by any standard.

I cued Zephyr from halt to canter. She sprung like a coil, driven by the haunches. We wouldn’t lose, I thought. Not if I could help it. No sooner had I thought it, though, then, Zephyr planted her front feet and ducked her head, trying to dump me. She was only halfway successful. I slid onto her neck, but held on to the mane and kept myself from being pitched headlong. It was at this moment that Connie and Jenny came into the barn. I was thoroughly ridiculous, far out of position, the grasped handfuls of hair the only thing between me and the dirt. Zephyr trotted off as I slid back into the saddle. I halted, still feeling for the irons with my booted toes.

Eddie only chuckled. “Dropped our guard, did we?”

“Damn horse.” I tried to force a smile to show what a good sport I was, but I was only partially successful. “How was the vetting?” I asked Jenny.

“Good. She said he has a popped left splint but that it was nothing to worry about.”

Connie laughed. “You’re starting to sound like a real horsewoman. A popped splint. Doc’s right—that’s nothing. Half the horses in any barn have popped a splint bone.”

A word on splint bones: In eons past, the “dawn” horses had feet much like dogs. Over years of evolution, one toe became prominent, and the others were reincorporated into the skeleton. A vestigial bone remains: the splint bone, running alongside the cannon bone of the horse’s leg. Sometime, during a hard run for instance, the extra bit of bone will pop away from

the main bone. The pain and inflammation are temporary, and the bone will set up in its new location, leaving only a slight bump on the inside of the leg.

I thought about this as I rode, what it would be like to trade hand for hoof. How strange evolution was. Mainly, I was avoiding thinking of Hobbes. He'd be a fun one to ride: or, at least, easy. Point him at a fence and go. While I was plodding away on Foxy and Zephyr, one whose jumping days were gone and one who still had a long way to go, Jenny would be moving along at a steady clip, jumping ever higher fences. I could see her on a summer day in the jumping field, Eddie adding bars after another fence was cleared, the way he'd done when Foxy and I were learning. Jenny would need to develop her muscles, confidence, balance, but as that came, she'd progress quickly.

The fire of jealousy burned and ate at me. Here I was, doing simple transitions, training Eddie's horse for him so he could sell her out from under me; meanwhile, Jenny had a nice horse on trial whom she would buy and ride to greater glory. She, who had only been riding a year, who didn't have to waste her time with a job, who had everything given to her on a silver platter, would soon compete against me, who had trained myself for years, who worked myself through school, who had only saved a measly two grand in the last year—enough for a broken down old trail horse maybe but not for the kind of horse I needed. Hobbes, at fourteen years old, still cost more than triple that, and I needed something better than Hobbes, something younger and more athletic. Something better than even Foxy had been in his younger days. Something that could jump the grand prix.

I thought, again, of the people I'd met at Jack Stuart's farm when Foxy and I went there for lessons. At two hundred dollars a pop, those lessons alone had taken a substantial chunk from my savings. His other students didn't mind the cost. They could afford to keep their horses

at the barn, where monthly board was double my own extortionate apartment rent. They had endless resources, complaining only about the weather and their fancy horses, who didn't always operate like the machines they wanted them to. I'd watch them as the grooms pulled out the lesson horse for me, brushed and saddled him. More grooms would be at work down the aisle, readying other horses. This was how it always was for these people: they didn't touch their horses until they mounted, the grooms giving them a leg up onto the backs of the enormous warmbloods the riders barely knew. How could they know them? They didn't know their favorite places to be scratched, their ticklish spots, the shape of the frog in each hoof. They didn't know anything except how to point their horse at a gigantic fence and how to stay on.

It was enough. It would always be enough, if you had money. The horses, unaware of their market value, did not always act according to the script. I'd seen the wealthiest in the dirt, cursing their animal—an animal who may or may not get sold for such a stop. To be fair, most of them realized the fault was their own, a fact Jack Stuart would remind them of in his nasal Boston accent. He never asked if they were ok: he asked if they knew what they'd done wrong, how they'd ended up out of the saddle. The tough ones would get back on and learn how to do it right. They were the ones I would have to always worry about. The ones who were not only rich, but tough. There were kids I'd met there, high school age girls and guys, with five horses at the barn and a private tutor so that they didn't have to worry about school. Their days were spent riding—in New Jersey in the summer and down in West Palm Beach in the winter. Each one wanted to ride for the Team. I imagined some of them would. They certainly had a better chance than I did.

Transitions: trot to halt to canter. Canter on down the long side. Extend the stride. Collect in the corner. Extend across the diagonal. Zephyr planted herself again, but this time I

was ready for her and kept my seat. I wondered how much talent this horse had, how much more muscle we could put on her, how much heart beat in his well-sprung ribs. Where were her limits? She had the bones; she had the bravado. If she knew she could jump a big fence, I couldn't see her stopping at one. And once she did, and did it consistently, she'd be on the market and out of my hands.

I needed to start saving better. I'd started well, putting a couple hundred a month by after the initial costs of moving (first and last months rent, etc). This last month had been worse: too many meals out with Timothy. I wasn't as frugal as I'd been. Now, I would rededicate myself.

I let Zephyr walk to cool down. Jenny had brushed Hobbes bright and now led him into Zip's newly vacated stall. Eddie leaned on the arena gate and asked me how things were going.

"With me or with Zephyr?"

"I already asked about Zephyr."

"Things are fine." I couldn't have sounded very convincing—I never was good at faking it—but Eddie said nothing. He didn't mention the hospital, the fact that I should have been at work. His eyes were on Zephyr, watching her move. I didn't ask when we'd start doing fences, though I wanted to. Eddie wouldn't start her until she was ready. We would go slowly, build her confidence, until she believed there was nothing she couldn't jump. I wanted her to love jumping in the way that Foxfire had loved jumping, but she wasn't that kind of horse. Instead, I hoped she'd see each fence as an affront, an insult, and clear it with the disdain it deserved. I hoped she'd see herself as better than all of it, constantly proving herself superior to wooden planks, to the wooden boxes painted like stone walls, to artificial flowers, and to shallow blue liverpools. If we could get that attitude out of her, we could have a real winner. It was a big if.

*

There were two messages on the phone when I got home.

1) “Joan. It’s Dave. I know you’re at work, but this is the only chance I’ve had to call you. I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately, and I think you should know that. We’re soulmates—do you know what I mean? I mean, the type of people who only find each other once in a lifetime if they’re lucky. That kind of love. I know you don’t want to believe in that, that you’re scared to believe in that, but it’s true. I don’t think you should throw that away. We could really be great together. You’ve got to see that. It’s got to be as clear to you as it is to me. Right?”

“I’ll talk to you soon.”

2) “It’s John here. John Rivers. Dr. Rivers. You know. I, um, heard you weren’t feeling well today, so I thought I’d call to see how you were doing, but I appear to have missed you? Or maybe you’re too sick to answer the phone? Anyway, I hope it isn’t anything serious. I know it’s not like you to take sick days.” He left his pager number.

There was nothing from Timothy. How much I’d give to have Dave’s message from Timothy’s lips.

I went to the kitchen and microwaved a frozen rice bowl, the iced vegetables turning sodden and limp in the heat. As it cooked, I took off my boots, peeled off my socks, and threw each sweaty, crumpled sock at the answering machine. Bullseye on both counts.

Dave, the problem I couldn’t fix, and Dr. Rivers, the problem in the making. Dr. Rivers would know now that I wasn’t sick. Fuck him. And fuck Dave for thinking he knew me: too scared to believe in love. Stupid Oprah-pop-psychobabble bullshit.

Steam scalded my fingers as I peeled back the plastic on my “entrée.” I stirred. The rice: overly starchy, synthetic, reminiscent of styrofoam peanuts. The browned bell peppers were

nauseating in their done-ness. I reminded myself that I was supposed to be de-stressing, regathering. I collapsed in front of the television, remote in hand, and tried to block out any thought whatsoever as daytime television flashed before me.

It didn't work. At two, I called Timothy and left my own machine message:

"Hey. Hadn't heard from you in a while, so I thought I'd just check that everything was ok. I got the impression from the last phone call that we may need to talk about things.

Reassess. Whatever. Give me a call when you get a chance..."

(I hung lamely on the phone line, unsure how to close: I miss you? I'd really like to see you? You're the first guy I've met who I thought I could love?)

"Bye."

Stupid. Noncommittal, yes, but wasn't it the wrong time to be non-committal? I should take a risk. I should show Timothy that I didn't want to lose him to his ex. This was not the way to get him back, but I couldn't get over the fear that she might be there when he checked messages, that she would hear me, the other possible woman, the role I seemed to be playing too frequently of late, and that she would laugh. How pathetic I would have looked: begging. She would sneer, and Timothy? I'd be degraded in his eyes, not the woman he thought I was. Not the woman I thought I was. No, I couldn't take that risk.

*

I tried to sound hoarse the next day at work, faking the occasional cough and snuffle. Seeing as I worked in a building full of health care workers, I'm sure I fooled no one, but I was also sure they'd think worse of me if I didn't try and fake it a little. I needed to keep up the ruse, for all of our sakes. I didn't normally play this game, but it seemed like the thing to do. Cheryl's shoulder had never warmed where I was concerned: it was as cold now as it had been for weeks.

I could only imagine the nasty gossip she spread behind my back, and hoped that most people had enough sense not to buy any of it.

Dr. Rivers came by mid-morning, attempting to be non-chalant. “Oh. Joan. Good to see you back on your feet.” As if he had or would ever see me in any other position.

“Yes, I feel much better.” I looked him right in the eye, challenging him to question my story.

He didn’t. Nor did he ask about the unanswered phone message he’d left. I didn’t bring it up either. Let him think whatever he wanted.

He shuffled a little and looked down at his coat. “Well, like I said, it’s good to have you back. You’re a good *tech*. One of our best.”

He left. I caught Cheryl’s smile in my direction, relishing the brevity of our conversation, the lack of friendliness that he’d been showing me lately. Tech: his way of reminding me of my place. And of his. Or perhaps I was reading too much into things.

*

The late afternoon light slanted in through the barn door. It gleamed in the dust like gold. Hobbes trotted obediently along, a forward working trot that required neither leg nor whip for its maintenance. His neck arched perfectly, though Jenny’s inexperienced hands allowed the bit to flop and wiggle in his mouth like a heavy fish. I imagined the 18mm of thick aurigan Herm Sprenger KK Ultra loose ring snaffle (triple the price of the best bit I owned) moving along the bars of his mouth, the broad expanse of toothless horse gum that seemed designed expressly to hold a bit. How distracting it must have been for an animal of his caliber: the constant meaningless messages, the Morris code of pressure applied and resolved that asked nothing. He carried himself anyway, as if Jenny’s contact was steady as a pro’s.

I brushed at the manure stains on Zephyr's side. Why did all greys roll? Why did they find the poopiest, muddiest spots to do it? I suspected a genetically linked trait: a means to camouflage their bright coats with muck, a guard against predation. The reasoning didn't help brush out the giant green splotch smeared across her ribcage.

Hobbes rocked into a perfect canter. Jenny beamed from his back. "Why didn't anyone tell me riding could be this easy?" she said.

It's not, I wanted to yell at her. Instead, I bit my tongue. She hadn't trained that horse. She wasn't the one who made his neck arch as it did, who keep his back up and his leg stretching so far under his body. It was small comfort to think his training was not permanent, that he would begin to lapse under her poor riding. I knew Eddie would keep him sharp for her, and that he'd work with her so that she could keep Hobbes sharp on her own.

With slight pressure, she brought him from canter to trot to halt, his feet perfectly square underneath him. A dressage judge would salivate over that halt. A solid 8, I decided. Maybe even an elusive 9. I imagined her scores adding up, the tests they would have. A tough pair to beat.

Zephyr kicked me, the hoof deflected off the leather of my half chaps. I was too close for her to do anything more than bruise me slightly. I swung the saddle pads onto her back, and she danced below them, tossing her head and snorting. We would work outside, riding by twilight in the empty field across the gravel road. I would not say a word to Jenny that night. I'd simply wave to her as she drove out, me still riding in the darkening light.

*

I was in a brutal mood when I got Timothy's message. How little it said: "Hey, Joan. It's Timothy. Give me a call." That was it. His voice laced with resignation, as if he were

exhausted by the effort of having to call me. I called him back anyway. Hung up on his machine.

I wasn't hungry, but I chopped the vegetables I'd just bought at Rosauers, where Timothy wasn't working tonight even though it should have been his shift. I wielded the knife with deft precision, trying to block out all the world outside of this cutting board, its piles sliced carrots and onion, the chopped broccoli, julienned peppers (both sweet and hot), the minced ginger and garlic. I put a pot of water on to boil with extra rice for easy leftovers. I was just beginning to slice a small steak into long thin strips when the ring of the telephone startled me, and instead of slicing the steak, I sliced the edge of myself: the long, quick cut running along my index finger. I stared. The callus built from years of reins in hand was now a course flap, my deeper red contusing underneath. I was lucky to have missed cutting the joint; I was lucky not to have cut all the way through, though I'd come about as close as possible: the thin flap of skin holding the lump of callus to the finger it belonged to.

I watched it bleed as the phone rang a second time, and I watched it bleed as I answered.

"Joan." It was Timothy. "It's good to hear your voice." He sounded sincere, laying emphasis on "good." I didn't trust his tone or his words.

"Is it?" The blood was distant. Foreign. The stinging, like the ringing of the phone, like the voice on it now: external things.

Timothy seemed unsure how to answer. Finally, "of course. It doesn't seem like we've had a chance to talk much."

"Listen." The blood ran down the side of my hand. I held it over the sink and continued to watch as it flowed. I was in no mood for bullshit. I was in no mood for old girlfriends on the side. "Is this a phone call to break up with me, or is this a phone call to let me know we're still

together?” I turned the water on, which made the pain present and real. I rubbed soap into it, gritting my teeth so as not to betray any sound of my hurt. The oil from the jalapenos I’d sliced mingled with the soap, burning. “Because, normally, I’m all for the friends thing, but I really don’t think I could handle that right now.”

“Whoa. Where’s this coming from? Breaking up?”

“Don’t do that. Don’t act like I’m crazy.”

Timothy was silent. I watched the blood, my blood, how it kept its red. Even in water, the color refused to dilute.

“When I called the other night, I could hear the girl in the background. If you’ve got another thing going on, if you’re getting back together with your fiancée... just don’t let me get in the way.”

“Is that what you think of me? You think I’m so fickle, so untrustworthy?” His voice deepened with each syllable, a crescendo of irritation. “You think I’m playing you?”

The blood was flowing faster now, my heart pumping faster to expel the foreign soap. I willed my voice steady against the red. “I didn’t say you were. I just said I’d get out of the way if you needed me to.”

“I don’t want you to.”

I twisted a handful of paper towels and rung them around the cut. Almost immediately, its white bloomed in blood geraniums. “Oh.” I was torn between wondering if I knew him at all and the core feeling that I did.

“What I mean is, you’re not in the way. There’s nothing to be in the way of.” There was a pause. “I wasn’t going to get into this,” Timothy sighed. “But I’m going to be completely honest with you, she *did* come over the other night. I won’t lie and say she didn’t want to get

back together. She did. But I told her no. I wasn't going to mention it because it wasn't worth mentioning."

I didn't know what to say.

"It's over between her and me." Timothy was quieter now. "You've got your past relationships, and I've got mine. But I don't intend to let either to get in the way. Do you?"

"No." I tossed the soaked paper towel and applied a new twist. I tried to figure out what to feel. The pressure seemed to have all swung the other direction, from no relationship to a relationship that was trumping his fiancée, the woman he loved and lost. There was a rushing in my ears. Mainly, I felt like a jerk, mistrusting him and rubbing salt in his wound.

We were both silent a moment, then he asked, "What are you doing right now?"

"Cooking dinner." I pulled the twist tighter around my finger, like a tourniquet. "Have you eaten?"

"No. I've been at the library, studying for an econ exam. I was just going to nuke something."

"Well, if you want stir fry, it'll be ready in about ten minutes."

"Deal. I'll be over soon."

"OK." My voice was distant in my ears. I would have said more, but the pot lid rattled and over-boiled before I could pull it from the burner. When I grabbed it, the trailing edge of my paper towel bandage lit on the gas burner, jumping into flame. The fire leapt high and quick. I tore it off and tossed it into the sink, dropping the phone that I'd been holding to my ear with my shoulder. Hissing and smoke; I sprayed it with water, its torch now a crumpled mass of blackened paper goop. I picked the phone up from the worn linoleum of the kitchen floor only to hear a dial tone.

I had dropped Timothy; he was gone. Coming over, I corrected myself.

The blood running down my hand was lurid in the kitchen lights. I watched it. My head: fogging. An overwhelming desire for clarity. I wrapped more paper towel. There was blood on the kitchen floor, crisp red dots, some streaked where I'd walked in them. Blood on my jeans, on my shoes. I needed to sit down.

Instead, I put the rice back on a lowered burner and heated a large skillet. There would be time to sit when Timothy got there. I pushed aside the blinds and looked briefly out of my sliding door, trying to make out the shape of Dave's truck in the street lights. Daring him to be there. Half-wanting him to be there so we could get this all over with, so he could understand that I wouldn't live a prisoner in a tower. I saw nothing. He'd gone home to Jenny; I was safe.

Butter bubbled in the skillet and, one-handed, I dropped the onions and carrots in, then the beef. I stirred. It browned. The stinging in my finger was spreading up my wrist; my whole hand tingling. I added ginger and garlic. The kitchen, now, was all steam and hissing. The paper towels were red again. I replaced them. There was a faint knocking as I added the peppers, giving them a brief stir before removing everything from the heat. "Come in," I called, but I could barely hear myself above the hissing in my ears. I staggered, trying to find balance in the fog. And then Timothy was there, in the kitchen, seeming taller than I remembered him.

"Joan," he said, eyes glued to my hand.

"The knife slipped," I said, lamely. I tried to steady myself on my feet. I hadn't lost enough blood to be so faint. I cursed my weakness.

He grabbed a chair from the table and turned it towards me in one motion. "Sit down before you fall down."

I did as he said, the wooden rungs of the chair's ladderback comfortably stiff. He rested his hand on my shoulder and looked in my eyes, as if checking for the presence of something.

"This is silly," I said. "I work in a hospital. Blood doesn't have this effect on me."

"The blood at the hospital isn't your own blood."

I felt paper thin. I felt as if Timothy was looking right through me. "This is ridiculous."

"How long have you been bleeding?"

"Since the phone rang."

"When?" (then, realizing) "When I called?" His face darkened. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I think it's slowing down." I lifted the paper towel. The edge of the flap instantly reddened, oozed, but the blood was thicker now. It no longer moved like water. The skin of my finger was stained and sticky. I swallowed, suddenly thirsty for something sweet and cold.

Timothy looked at me doubtfully. "I think maybe we should take you in."

"For what?" I watched the congealing blood gather a moment, then re-wrapped the paper towel.

"I don't know. Stitches?"

"This spot wouldn't be good for stitches." I was coming back into myself, thinking clinically. "I need butterfly closures. I have some in the first aid kit in my bathroom."

I moved to stand but Timothy pushed me back into my seat with a sure hand. "I'll get them," he said. "You just tell me where to look."

"Under the sink. It's a large tupperware with a blue lid."

Timothy emerged with it in moments, its familiar beaten plastic balanced against his stomach, his strangely delicate hands curled under each side. "You weren't kidding when you

said 'large.' You planning to use your home for triage during the next civil war or what?" He laughed, trying to lighten the situation: good bedside manner.

He popped open the scuffed lid from the tub and shifted through tubes of bacitracin, packets of sterile non-stick pads, assorted gauze, rolls of ace bandages, varying widths of medical tape, and boxes upon boxes of band-aids. I watched him, the smooth skin of his cheek, his long straight nose. His hair fell over his face as he dug through the neatly ordered boxes. "Stop, stop," I grabbed the butterfly closures. "You're messing with my system."

"Does one person need this many bandaids?"

I shrugged. He took the closure from my fumbling hand and peeled the tape from the back. "I take the tub to horse shows with me," I said. "You never know what might happen."

Timothy shook his head, looking amused. "Tough cookie," he murmured. He kissed my head. I felt myself sliding towards him as he moved to place the closure over my wound.

"Stop again." I laid my hand on his. "I need to wash this first, then a little antibiotic ointment." I walked to the sink on steadier legs and held back a flinch as I rubbed the stinging soap again into the cut. Timothy was ready with the ointment when I sat back in the chair, wiping the excess with paper towel before peeling the back from each butterfly closure.

He looked into the box. "Do you want any of this other stuff?"

I considered for a moment, then pulled out a small sterile non-stick pad, the thinnest width of rolled gauze, and the white medical tape. "This one first," I said, handing him the pad. "Then roll the gauze over it to hold it in place. Then a little tape to secure the gauze." I watched him work, cautioning him only when he pulled the gauze and tape too tightly. For a novice, he didn't do bad work. I was all business again now. When I looked up from the bandage, the room seemed clarified. Clarified and messy: the spatula cattywampus on the skillet, the rice in

danger of burning, blood on the floor, wads of blood-reddened paper towels. Timothy followed my gaze. “Stay,” he told me, then gathered skillet and rice, searched the cabinets for plates and flatware, and finally grabbed two beers from the fridge. The bottle was cool in hand, its coolness helping to clear the last of the fog from my head. I drank, the bubbles fizzing in my throat, the sensation returning me to the kitchen, to this moment. I looked at Timothy, the familiar, clean flannel, and smiled.

“How come you’re not working tonight?” I asked. “I went by Rosauers earlier, and you weren’t there.”

“Told you: I have an econ test to study for. I switched with Clara. Bad news is I have to work a double shift on Saturday.”

“Yuck.”

Timothy smiled at me again. “You nearly cut off your finger and you say ‘yuck’ to my double shift?”

“Hey man, the finger will heal, but you’ll never get your Saturday back.”

Timothy took a bite of stir fry and raised his eyebrows. “Hey, this is good.”

“Of course it’s good. What the hell did you expect?”

Timothy smiled broadly. “I don’t think I’ve had your cooking before.”

“Well, I’m no slouch.”

“No. I see that.” He dug in, eating with the apparent relish that couldn’t help but flatter. “I’ll have to cook for you sometime,” he said after a moment. “Return the favor.” He winked at me, that damned Eastwood wink that made me want to crawl into his lap. “I’m no slouch either,” he said.

After dinner, Timothy cleaned the dishes, the scattered paper towels, the floor, then, kissed me and left again to study for the dreaded econ test. The first half hour alone with my thoughts wasn't so bad. I thought about how sweet he'd been, how nice it was that he bandaged me and took care of me, even cleaned. I could've taken care of myself, sure, but it was nicer to be taken care of once in a while.

The next half hour was harder. Doubts crept in: the girl's voice on the phone haunted my ear. What if they weren't so very broken up? What if there was no econ test tomorrow? That was silly of course—why would he leave one woman and have a quick dinner with another, only to go back to the first? Timothy was not Dave, I reminded myself silently, and then again, more firmly. But what if she was still there in the background somewhere, the invisible woman. Like Jenny had been an invisible woman, now so very real.

By midnight, I was pacing my living room, my finger throbbing slightly with each step. I should have been asleep hours ago.

I didn't really doubt Timothy, I decided. I didn't doubt the econ test. I didn't even really doubt that he'd sent his ex-fiancée home, though her figure hung large in my imagination. He seemed sincere about that, about it being over. No, separation: that was the problem, and Dave was the cause of it.

What bugged me was the empty blank that should have been our time together that both Timothy and I were filling with alternatives. That was what ate at me. That wasted time, that lost time, irrecoverable. The ever-ticking clocks.

How dare I ask anything of Timothy: monogamy, trust, love? We'd barely had the time together to start to figure one another out, let alone form something better. And here I was sacrificing that essential for a man I didn't care for: fucking Dave. How stupid I was to make a

monster out of him. He was human, that was all. Scary, yes, but what frightened me most was the way I had let him determine my most basic movements: whom I called, whom I ate dinner with, where I slept: the power I had ceded to him. I would wrest it back.

A confrontation. That's what we needed. The showdown at the OK Corral. The final shot. One person left standing. A dinner, I decided. El Mercado. The same group as last time but with Timothy added. Three couples. Three units of human connection. Dave would have to deal with that, the fact that I wasn't on my own any more, the fact that Jenny, not me, was the other part of his unit.

Make it public, and he couldn't act—not with Jenny right there, not with Dawn's fierce tongue, not with Russ and Timothy. I saw the whole thing: the terra cotta color of the rough plastered walls, the straw sombreros hung in the corners against the rich color of hand woven ponchos, the fajita smoke thick in the air, the plastic foliage of the corner plants, the table, each of us sitting by our lover. I could see Dave's frustration, but I couldn't see beyond that.

The final straw: he'd hate me for this, and I wanted him to. If he hated me, he'd release me. He'd put his love back on Jenny; he should never have strayed. It would work the way I wanted because it had to, because I would not spend the rest of my days locked in this apartment, watching his truck through the bars of my vertical blinds, a damsel in distress waiting for salvation. If my prison was self-imposed, then a prison break should be easy.

Steal the key when the guard is sleeping, I thought as I lay down and pulled the quilt over me. Catch him by surprise. Don't let them know you're bringing Timothy until you're at the restaurant itself.

Let him think about it when the prison cell is empty. Let him figure out what to fill it with.

*

The morning came too soon, cold and clammy with a thick November fog. I hit snooze and skipped my jog, then lay awake in bed until it buzzed again, irritated at my laziness.

It was not a good day at work. The wrap on my finger made me slightly clumsy typing and adjusting the instrumentation. Mainly, I was tired and anxious from lack of sleep—I rarely did well on less than a good night’s rest. Even Cheryl commented that I was pale, seeming almost kind in her concern, though I wasn’t fool enough to buy that kindness. “You look like you might be having a relapse,” she said, referring to the illness I had faked. Dave at the source of that sickness, too. “I think you may be right,” I said, holding my bandaged finger against my side, out of sight, so I didn’t give her anything else to gossip about.

Mid-morning, I was paged to ER: a car wreck. Five people from a head-on on 95, just north of town. The truck driver was DOA, thrown from his vehicle, but the family from the passenger car was still breathing. The father and toddler were in the right side of the vehicle and fared best. Her booster seat had held up well, and though she had some minor abrasions, she would be ok; her healthy screams echoed off the walls of the ER. The dad had whiplash, lacerations, and appeared to have broken his arms and wrists when he’d braced against the dash. The mom looked battered, broken everywhere, as was their six year old son whose seat belt had not entirely contained him, severing his arm at the shoulder and allowing him to go crashing into his mother’s seat. The EMT’s clamps on his axillary artery were doing their best to stem the flow of the blood, but a steady drip was reddening the gurney sheet.

He was my charge. I lifted him, gently pulling up the sodden bed sheet to slide x-ray plates under his body. He looked invertebrate, a jellyfish, his face swollen full, stretching his pale skin. My finger pounded under his meager weight, though he felt bird-light against the

sheet. I lowered him onto the plate, careful to move around the arm he no longer had, as if touching the shadow of where it had been could hurt him, the arm they'd have on ice and waiting.

I found myself thinking of Jennifer and that long ago car wreck. Had she looked like this the night of the accident? What tech had x-rayed her? Had they been gentle enough as they lifted her sheet? Her body would have been heavier than this boy's. She'd had longer to grow, longer to determine the course of her life, and still, she'd ended here.

I dimmed the room lights to better see the positioning light of the machine, and maneuvered the portable x-ray unit as quickly as I could, knowing we were in a race against his fading pulse. Glass imbedded in his skin and stiffened hair made him shimmer, even in the dimmed light. His hair could have been any color: white blonde, red, black; there was no way of telling now, blood-darkened and crusting as it was. He could have been anybody's child. The accident had robbed him of his features, his individual exterior.

I adjusted the machine. Clavicles, sternums, ribs, facial bones, spinal column: we would focus on the core first, locating lung-puncturing bone shrapnel, gathering the crucial information before he went to the OR. I took my pictures and jumped back out of the way while the doctors and nurses went to work, but not before I saw that the boy had begun to cry blood. The red hemorrhaged from his tear ducts over his eerie, still face. Where was he, the soul that inhabited this body? Not there, certainly. So shattered.

His sister's wails reverberated against the walls and through my skeleton until I felt I would shatter as well, collapsing internally like a glass in response to that one perfect note. I know I should be hard to it by now, but in moments like this, I hate my job. Try as I may to imagine that I am part of a team that could help save their lives, I looked at that mother and child

and felt terror welling in me. His face did not seem human, so swollen. I thought again of invertebrates. The bones weren't giving him shape; his body was fluid-filled and filling. His Dad's primeval groans echoed off the walls, behind the curtains that hid his son from him. *He can feel the loss of him*, I thought. *He can feel his soul slipping away from its anchor*. Not a medical thought. Not a professional thought. I had to get out of there. "Need anything else?" I asked.

Dr. Rivers, now leaning over the boy, gave a curt shake of his head. I was good to go, and go I did, faking calm as well I could, concentrating on my sneakered feet as they slapped the waxed linoleum silently. My nails, raggedly short as they were, bit into my palms. *Relax*, I told myself, *relax*, but all I could see was that glass-glimmered child who, I was sure, wouldn't make it: the softness of him where bones should have made him hard, the bruises growing purple on his cheeks, blooming with transfused blood.

My stomach twisted within me, and I dashed into the bathroom and vomited the toast and milk that had been my breakfast. I hated it when kids came in. I hated it when they died. *He might not die*. I fought to remember that—that his fate had not been decided yet, that Dr. Rivers was doing his best.

I rinsed my mouth in the sink and tried to put the image of the child out of my mind, but it floated there. And there was the guilt. How selfish I was, up all night thinking of Dave and Timothy. Here was a family with real problems: a mother whose momentary lapse in attention, whose stray over the dividing line, would most likely cost her her own life and that of her child. And then the father and his small daughter would have to live with it. He'll wonder whether he could have pulled that steering wheel right, he'll wonder what slowed his hand. She'll grow up

guilty because she's forgotten her mother's face, her mother's love. Perhaps the dead were the lucky ones after all.

I splashed water over my face and dried it with harsh paper towels, hoping I could hold myself together at least until I got past Cheryl. The bathroom was insanely white. The seamless linoleum spotless and glaring, its whiteness denying that this was a place of blood, death, loss. A visceral place. A place of bodies failing.

I found myself sobbing. This was worse than normal. Why couldn't I get that kid out of my vision? I stared hard at the white walls that surrounded me, trying to fill myself with their blankness. I was over-tired, over-stressed, but again my tiredness and stress seemed pathetic in this context. Insufficient excuses in the face of duty.

And then, the welling anger: it built low in my knees and washed upward, hot as blood: anger at the kid for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, anger for his being in my place, this hospital, at all. Anger at his mother for forgetting her car was a lethal weapon, for not steering better and protecting her child. She at least had had a chance to do something in her life, but what chance had the child had? A stupid fucking waste, that was all. His life would come to nothing. He'd never achieve anything. (Unless Dr. Rivers performed a miracle and saved him.) He would never even have the chance to set goals for himself, let alone the chance to meet those goals. His life would be a blank, terrifying in its emptiness.

I set my jaw and wiped my eyes again. They were red and watery, but there was nothing to be done about that. A last look in the mirror, tuck the stray curl behind the ear. I had to go back, back to radiology to face the standard, complaining patients: the broken bones, the barium-filled intestines. They, too, needed healing. I tore the soiled nitrite gloves from my hands, their bright purple obscene in the white light. The boy's arterial blood had stained my bandaged

finger, had dripped through that sheet, had flowed through a pin-sized hole in my thin gloves, my barrier.

I looked at myself. And what had I achieved? Who the fuck was I to cast blame on another woman's error, the one moment when she hadn't steered her family clear? Anger, self-loathing, hardened around my eyes: a decent mask. Now, I would make it past Cheryl without losing my demeanor.

She was sitting at her desk inspecting her fingernails. What a waste of space that woman was! My jaw clenched tighter. A teenaged patient with a pair of crutches flipped through a magazine in the waiting area, ignoring his mother as she fidgeted next to him. Cheryl looked up at me as I approached.

"Sounds like a bad one in ER," she said. "How are things looking?"

"Not good," I said, barely slowing my pace as I walked past her.

"We won't be seeing Dr. Rivers today then," she said. She sighed audibly. "That's too bad. I imagine you'll miss him."

I knew I shouldn't bother, especially with patients there, but I turned on my heel and walked back to her. "Would you care to explain what you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing." She didn't look at me, but patted the back of lacquered curls. "Only, you two seem awfully close lately."

I glared at her, trying to decide if it was worth my while, fighting her slanders. "I just came from a room where a family is fighting for their lives." I spoke in a whisper, my face now inches from hers, trying to retain any shred of professionalism. "If you want to sit here and make idle speculations about some perceived attraction between me and any other employee of this hospital, then that's your deal, but I am not in the mood, so keep your comments to yourself."

I turned and walked away, only to hear her chuckling to Doreen about how she “must have hit awfully near the mark to get that reaction.”

I slammed the door of room one behind me, rubbing my forehead, feeling where the mask had cracked, where emotion had shown in spite of myself. My finger stung with the pressure of its metacarpal against my own solid skull. I ignored the stinging, again willing an ounce of stoicism to carry me through. I thought of Timothy and wondered what his day was like. Less stressful than this one, surely, I thought, and the thought comforted me somewhat, knowing that somewhere, life was calm, though a piece of me resented his easier day. I was jealous of it. But tragedy was confined at least. Its fingers only spread so far, probed so many lives.

I wanted to go to the barn. Now, this minute. To lose my consciousness in the spell of a good hard ride. To face surmountable problems, to work towards a reachable goal: the fences that we would clear. The ride would wait until after my shift; it would have to.

Zephyr: now that was an animal who understood personal tragedy, though the nature of her personal adversity would always be her secret. She knew the right way to take setbacks, though: fight. Fight.

I opened the door to room one and asked Doreen to send the next patient in. The boy hobbled back, clumsy on the crutches, moving them tentatively, hopping forward, not fully trusting them with his weight. I looked at the chart to see what bones I needed to radiograph: the ankle. If it was broken, I thought, he'll soon be used to crutches. I thought of the follow-up patients we sometimes saw, how they swung their bodies in graceful arcs, pendulums of their private clock. The endless clock of the body: our tragic illusion. We ignored the winding down.

*

It was near the end of my shift. I had just finished a patient and was getting ready to call for the next, the last for me that day, when Dr. Rivers slipped into room one. His eyes looked sunken, the circles underneath an unnatural purple. Wraithlike, he even moved as if he had to contrive his own animation, as if his spark of life was extinguished and he was moving by a will beyond his own. His ER shift should have been over hours earlier, but I knew well why he'd stayed. He was a good doctor. He put everything he had into his work: mind, body, soul.

"We just lost the boy," he said, not looking at me. "I thought you might want to know."

I sunk onto my small stool, the air of its black vinyl cover sighing and sinking beneath me. I looked at him standing there in his limp coat, even his clothing exhausted from the effort of trying to save one child. "There was never much hope, was there?"

Dr. Rivers looked at the ceiling. He seemed to be struggling with something. "I thought maybe if we could stabilize him enough, we could airlift him to Spokane and he'd have a chance."

I was silent a moment. The dim light of the room felt more appropriate for this conversation than the white outside. "How is the mom?"

"We just put her on the helicopter. She'll be in surgery at Sacred Heart within the hour. No guarantees, but she has a chance. She may make it."

"And the dad and the sister are ok."

"We set the dad's wrists and arms and gave him a sedative. The girl looks like she wasn't even in the car with them. They're in a room together right now, recovering. I think we'll be able to send them home tonight if someone can drive him."

Again, we were silent for a while.

“If it hadn’t been for that seat belt laceration. He’d just lost so much blood. And with all those broken bones.” His voice cracked. We both knew that if it weren’t for that seatbelt, he wouldn’t have even made it to the ER. He’d have been just another DOA.

I looked at Dr. Rivers. “There was nothing you could do. You did all that you could.” The stupid mechanical answers: I had no real comfort to offer. “You should go home and get some rest.”

Dr. Rivers snorted a sarcastic laugh that I hadn’t heard from him before. “The rest cure.”

I shrugged. “You know as well as I do that there’s no real help for this.”

Dr. Rivers looked me in the eye, face drawn. I couldn’t quite read his expression. “That’s honest, at least, if nothing else.” He looked like a haunted man, his eyes possessed and unearthly.

I shrugged again, and I could feel the weight of that boy in my shoulder joints, pushing down, infusing the ligaments, the tendons with the usual exhaustion that comes with a lost patient. I saw his small, battered face in front of me again, the blood tears coursing. I set my jaw and met Dr. Rivers’s gaze as if it was a challenge. His hair product was failing; a long strand hung over his eye. He looked almost like the star of some period drama: Rhett Butler at work. Yes, honesty. If I said something, it was what I felt. Only I didn’t always say anything.

When he stepped closer, it discomfited me. I held the gaze, but I felt my resolution waver. I tensed. Dr. Rivers ran the back of his hand along my cheek—there was no mistaking that gesture, its tenderness, its hope. I knew the loneliness that had generated it. You can’t look at a person die and not want someone warm and sensate to cling to. But it was the wrong time to be lonely. I stood, unresponsive as marble and as cold, feeling the softness of his hand.

I turned away, and again, I heard the sarcastic snort.

“A bit of a cold fish, aren’t you, Joannie?”

“Whatever,” I said under my breath. And then, louder. “This is work. It’s a job. My job.” Which wasn’t entirely honest.

“And you think a relationship with me would sacrifice that? Your job as a tech?”

It was the most blunt he’d ever been. I tried to find my bearings. My ears felt hot. Damn it, I was blushing. “I have a boyfriend,” I said, but it sounded lame in my eyes. An evasion of the immediate issue. Non-committal. The truth was, there was no spark—why couldn’t he feel that?

Dr. Rivers looked again toward the ceiling. He sighed. “I’m sorry. It’s been a long day. I don’t know what I was thinking, coming in here.”

Part of me hated him for being here, for putting me on the spot, for calling me a tech again, for always reinforcing the hierarchy. The other part of me felt for him. *You’re lonely*, I thought. *That’s why you’re here. You weren’t thinking anything. You were feeling.* I wouldn’t say it. I would not respond at all. Perhaps I was a cold fish after all. I could almost feel myself as one right now, in the dim light of this shallow pool, struggling against so many currents.

I imagined him going back to his lavish, empty apartment. The porsche in the garage didn’t make up for much after all, did it? I found myself thinking of Jack Stuart Flaherty back in New Jersey: “you’re young, you’re attractive, why don’t you get married?” Was this the type of husband Jack Stuart had in mind when he sat me down all those months ago—over a year now, I realized with a small degree of shock—and told me I needed a show horse if I was going to progress?

“It’s been a long day all around,” I said. Longer for that family than it would be for us. I looked at him, pathetic in his tired coat. “I’m sorry.” And I hoped he heard the finality in my

words that I intended them to have. I rose and placed my hand on his shoulder, proving, I hoped, that I wasn't just cold and uncaring. "Seriously, though, get some rest."

He looked at my hand, and I worried that I'd sent a mixed signal. Then, he stepped out from underneath it, and I let it drop. He straightened his tie. "It was inappropriate," he said, "me coming in here. Please, forget it ever happened."

"It's forgotten," I said, but I knew it wasn't the answer he was hoping for, the answer his eyes sought in mine. Something in me reached toward him again, a stirring of sympathy so deep I couldn't locate it in my anatomy. I didn't move. Externally, nothing about me so much as quivered.

He looked at me. "You understand, though, I had to try."

I understood, but I didn't say it. I said, "Forget about it. I won't ever mention it."

It wasn't the answer he wanted; I could tell by the way he reeled from me. It was as if he'd been slapped. Then, brusque, he walked out of the room. I'd dealt him a blow on top of the boy's death: two lonelinesses he'd have to struggle through.

I looked at my watch. 4:05, I should have been on my way to the barn by now. I straightened my scrubs, as if they needed straightening, and headed out.

Cheryl's chuckle slowed me. I knew better than to stop, and yet I stopped. "Would you care to tell me what's so funny?"

Cheryl smirked. "Room one seems to be turning into our own little tunnel of love, doesn't it?"

I stared at her. I couldn't believe she'd been so forward; I was used to her speaking in innuendo, but she'd laid out all her cards. I bit my lip for just a moment, gathering, then I spoke. "Dr. Rivers just came to inform me of the status of the patients from ER this morning. The boy

died. He was six. His mother has been air-lifted to Spokane, and she might die, too.

Meanwhile, the dad and two-year old sister are going to have to fend for themselves for a little while, which may be tricky since both his wrists are broken. Does that satisfy you?"

The smile had dropped from Cheryl's face. Her mouth worked, but she said nothing.

"And just so this nonsense stops, I'll just go ahead and tell you I have a boyfriend. His name is Timothy, and I like him quite a lot. Too much to start anything on the side here in the hospital—not that I would risk my job, anyway. It's none of your business, of course. I like my personal life to stay just that: *personal*. But, if knowing about Timothy will help you keep your mouth shut, then I'm glad I told you. Now, you will stop your little snide hints and speculations, or I will report you. Are we clear?"

Cheryl drew her face back. She had paled beneath the layers of makeup. "No need to get snippy, Joan. It was all very friendly, I'm sure."

She is expecting an apology now, I thought. That would be the kind thing to do, and, as my mother liked to remind me, kind words cost nothing. But I couldn't quite believe that at this moment. To be kind to Cheryl now would exact a great cost, the words would come at an expense I was not willing to spare. I turned and left.

Leaving Cheryl gaping behind me, I felt better than I had all day. Not great, not even good, but better. How could I feel that way with a small boy dead? I climbed in my truck and cranked the engine, listening to it roar and warm.

*

The blood on my finger was the boy's blood.

I did not go home and change my bandage. I went to the barn and pulled on my leather gloves, letting them push the life-stained gauze against my skin. It seemed like the least I could

do, to remember him that way, to have something of him, to have it close as I rode and temporarily forgot the day in the non-verbal world of leg pressure, hand pressure, shifts in weight, in the center of gravity. When Zephyr tossed her head against the lead rope and later the rein held in that injured hand, the searing reminded me that the world was a different place now. One of its small ones was missing and would not return.

I took Zephyr out into the hills, neglecting again to ask Eddie's permission. We jumped banks, we galloped. She was starting to know me. I was increasingly subtle with the aids: a look in a new direction, slight pressure from the leg and she turned. We were coming to terms: learning how to stay out of each other's way.

It was a crisp day, and twilight was already well advanced. We kept it short and raced dusk home, walking the last few hundred yards for discipline's sake and continuing our cool down in the indoor ring. Dawn had arrived to clean stalls.

"Damn," she said, as we rode in, "you know I'm the last one to want to admit it, but Zephyr's actually starting to look like a half-decent horse. Or, at least, her hipbones don't look like they're going to push straight through her skin."

I patted Zephyr on the shoulder. "Good grain and good work. She's getting some muscle."

Dawn grunted. "I still say she's a waste of pasture space."

I smiled. "I wouldn't expect you to say anything else." Dawn disappeared into Hobbes's stall, pulling the wheelbarrow after her to block the stall door. Zephyr stretched her neck out and forward, yanking more rein across my lacerated finger. A little pain to bring me back to myself, to the business at hand, to getting rid of Dave and having a life, to stopping the wasted time.

“Hey,” I said, “it’s been a while since we all went out to dinner. What do you think of getting everyone together at El Mercado’s again? Say Friday night?”

Dawn stopped shoveling and stuck out her head. “Russ and I should be free. You talked to Jenny?”

“Not yet.”

“I need to call her tonight anyway—we’re supposed to go for a trail ride tomorrow afternoon if I can cut out of work a little early. I’ll mention the dinner idea and give you a call.”

“Perfect.” Better than perfect, I thought, relieved of that phone call. I hopped off Zephyr, leaving the rein slack as if she was Foxy. She saw her opportunity and nipped my thigh, punishing my trust. I flicked my crop against her neck, punishing in return. She folded her hocks underneath her body, throwing herself back against the reins in my left hand, bringing them again across the cut with a force that tore open any healing my finger had managed. I left my gloves on, but I felt the warmth of blood oozing again under the bandage. Dust rose from her shuffling hooves. “Stop it now,” I crooned, willing my tone calm. “Easy now.”

“Waste of pasture space,” Dawn called from the stall, a shovel-full of piss-sodden wood chips tossed out with the words into the waiting wheelbarrow.

*

This time, when I called, Timothy picked up right away. “What are you doing Friday night?” I asked.

“Going out with you?”

“Excellent.” I picked at the edges of the medical tape on my finger. “How do you feel about Mexican food?”

“El Mercado?”

“Unless you prefer Taco Time. You a secret fan of ‘Mexi-fries’?” I asked, referring to the sad little tater tots they served at the drive thru.

Timothy snorted.

“El Mercado it is,” I said. “There’s a catch, though. I’m inviting some of the girls from the barn.”

“Who?” Suspicion.

“Dawn and Jenny, plus husbands.”

“Jenny? But isn’t she the one with the psycho who’s stalking you?”

“Yep.” I let it sink in a moment.

Timothy finally said, “I’m not sure that’s such a hot idea.”

“I am. I’m sick of this: being trapped in my apartment, afraid to see you. It’s fucked, and I’m sick of it.”

Timothy was quiet.

“You’re going to have to trust me,” I said. I peeled off the first layer of gauze, the boy’s blood brown and stiff in its cotton web. “When Dave sees us together, he’s going to have to realize he doesn’t have a chance. He’s going to have to leave me alone.”

“Joannie, I don’t think you’ve thought this out all the way. Think of the Rosauers parking lot. You could get really hurt.”

“Jenny will be there this time.”

“He doesn’t seem to care a whole lot about her.”

A valid point, but I shrugged it off. I didn’t want to think about the night itself, or its potential dangers. I wanted to think about the possible life afterwards. “He cares for her more than he admits.” I slid the nonstick pad from over the wound. Zephyr hadn’t done as much

damage as I'd feared. There was some new blood along the jagged seams of skin, but nothing overwhelming. "Trust me. This'll work."

Timothy was silent a while longer. I willed him to see it my way, to go along with my plan. I felt my confidence flag in his silence. He was right, after all. I was banking on sanity from a man who'd proven his craziness, but still I thought he'd behave. After all, he hadn't attacked me inside Rosauers, but outside. It seemed like an important difference. Finally, Timothy spoke: "man, you're asking a lot, Joannie. I don't want to see you get hurt." He paused. "I don't think I could handle that."

It was as close as he'd come to a confession of love, and it choked me for a minute. More than ever, my plan seemed wrong. More than ever, I needed to do something to see Timothy, to have a life with him. As wrong as the plan might be, it was the only plan, and I wanted it to happen.

"This could really backfire," he said, but he followed it with a resigned sigh.

"But you'll do it?" I held my breath.

"I still think it's dangerous," he said, then sighed, "but yes. I'll do it."

"That's my man."

Timothy snorted. "Doing dumb things to prove loyalty."

"It'll work." I said, peeling the butterfly closures off in the opposite direction than the knife had gone in. *It'll work*, I told myself again after we'd hung up. It had to. I needed my life back, my space back. I needed Timothy. I needed to be able to move.

*

I went running after I hung up, making up for the jog I'd skipped that morning. I hadn't bothered to re-bandage my finger: the air would be good for it. I'd close it up in tape and gauze before I went to bed, so I didn't hurt it in my sleep.

The night air was invigorating. Crisp, dark. I placed my feet carefully, as a thin mist had moved across the streets, slicking it with the beginnings of black ice. An exercise in balance.

I inhaled in deep, slow breaths, feeling the cool air on my tongue, on the back of my throat, my warmth more powerful than its freeze. I moved from the light of one street lamp's halo to the next. I was half in love with the rhythm of my feet, the pressure as each heel came down on the frozen sidewalk, the roll onto the toes. In tune. Invincible. I could run for miles like this—and would. I hadn't felt this good since the morning I ran into Dr. Rivers on the road. I couldn't believe I was hitting my stride, here, now, after an exhausting day, a short hard ride. I had thought I was tired until I tied my shoes, but before I was even over the threshold, I felt the energy surge, as if something in the act of lacing had changed everything.

The clouds rolled over a near-full moon, edges silvered by its light, gorgeous. Everything glimmered, just like the boy in the ER had. I thought of him again now. My parents would see him as a soul waiting for good judgment, waiting for the journey to sing in that heavenly chorus of angels. What did I think? I didn't know. Surely there was more than this life.

But on a night like this, could heaven offer anything better? Was there air like this in heaven? Was joy possible without a body to feel it in: these legs striding, these lungs breathing, this mouth tasting the sweetness of that freezing mist? And the silence, broken only now and then by the low hum of snow tires on pavement, a music in its own right—what could replace

that? If our mortal sphere, our Earth could be this good, even after a day like mine had been, then what's a heaven for?

Attitudes like these had shocked my CCD teachers years ago. Training for confirmation, I'd asked what evidence there was that the Bible was divinely inspired. The teacher, that sad old man (or so he struck me at the time), had melted down completely. His skin reddened right to the bald spot in the middle of his thin red hair, and he quivered within the thin madras plaid of his Sunday shirt as he answered in barely controlled rage. He talked about how big a book it was, how many stories there were, how impossible the achievement would have been for the merely mortal men who wrote each part without divine guidance. *Bullshit*, I'd thought.

It was around that time I talked my mother into letting me stay home on Sundays. My parents, knowing that forcing me to do anything would only increase my resistance, had relented. They figured, if they kept me in church against my will, I'd never accept Catholicism, never take God willingly into my heart. They were right, but even unforced, I never did come around like they had hoped. We merely agreed to disagree and avoided the topic of the state of my soul altogether. I still groped for answers that nothing seemed to hold.

My legs felt tireless this evening, like I could do a marathon if I tried. I passed my old high school, a heavy brick box built by Roosevelt's CCC back in the Depression, ornamented with a concrete dentile along its roofline and later annexed with the functional but imagination-deprived architecture of the nineteen sixties: another brick box with no added frills save the large brown squares of, what?, metal? plastic?, that filled out the area above and below each meager window. I wondered if the same shades still hung inside: the long rolls vertically striped with circus colors: turquoise and green in some rooms, marigold and orange in others.

Jennifer and I had been all through that building, I thought as I passed it and left it behind me. I remembered sack lunches parked in the hallways in front of her locker, oblivious to the hard brown linoleum tile floors, laughing at the ridiculousness of our teachers and our peers with their petty concerns, then laughing more trying to determine if the school even contained a guy worth dating, satirically aware of our own petty needs and desires. That was all before.

I ran on. How quickly a crash could change everything. We were supposed to get together next day, study for our trig test. I'd called her mom when she didn't show. That's how I'd found out.

And that car crash family today: what obligations would they fail to meet? How would they explain what had happened? Wherever that boy was, maybe Jennifer was with him. Somewhere placeless.

It was small comfort. I ran on. The branches of the trees against the moonlight threw shadowy lace across my path. The breeze was picking up, blowing through my fleece, my body now too warm to mind the cool. I imagine myself now: what I'd look like if I stopped, the steam rising through my stocking cap, shining in the moon and lamp light. Mystical, as if my own soul were going on a day trip.

I thought of Jennifer's last birthday: seventeen. We had a party on the Mountain, the Hoedown Jamboree, a loving tribute to rednecks everywhere. Jennifer and I wore matching trucker hats from Conoco and our tightest flannel. Half the school showed up, hicked out, chewing straw and tobacco, cheap illegal beer tucked casually under arm. Oly, Hamm's, Milwaukee's "Beast" by the case. Rumor had it that Chad Johnston brought a sixer of Rainier, but if he did, he either kept it to himself or it went just that fast, because I certainly never saw it. In the boom box, we alternated bootlegged tapes of old country: Kenny Rogers, Patsy Cline,

Johnny Cash. When we knew the words, we belted them out (*Mamas, don't let your babies grow up. To be Cowboys.*) and when we didn't, we danced like fools.

It was a historic party, one to be written of in yearbooks and talked about at reunions. Jenny had flirted with the punk that night. I hadn't paid much attention. I was flirting with plenty of guys too, but I certainly had no intention of actually dating any of them. Mainly, I flirted to feel the sense of my own power, to feel how badly they wanted me, and not to yield.

Later, when the party was winding down, Jennifer and I lay on the hood of the Pod, reclined against the windshield, drinking warm cans of Schmidt's ("the every other letter beer") and watching the horizon lighten through the dark pines. She talked about what she was going to do after high school. If she didn't mess up, she'd be valedictorian; she had lettered in cross country, track, soccer. She was already filling out applications to big schools in glamorous places: Berkeley, UCLA, NYU, the University of Chicago. "Get the hell out of this town," she said. "Do something major."

I had been quiet. I had no plans. All I cared about was riding Foxy—my new horse. It was weird to think of him as new now, of not knowing him precisely. I'd only just met Eddie, too. He didn't train high school students, but was talked into taking me on by my last riding teacher. I remember how he'd surveyed me with wary eyes: looking for signs of flightiness, loudness, lack of commitment. I determined instantly to show him none. Foxy, he liked from first sight. Couldn't believe my parents had found him in a neighbor's yard, an out of shape pasture pet trained for Western pleasure and showing no aptitude. He'd taught Foxy to jump and taught me that there was more to riding than just staying on. He was a far more demanding trainer than my early teachers had been. I bought a jumping saddle and never looked back. How things had changed.

I ran on. I didn't slow until the last quarter mile, when I broke stride to a walk to begin my cool down. My breath kept coming deep and rich, slowing slightly after I'd walked a few paces. I shook some warmth into my hands, which were beginning to sting in the cold of the night, and tried to think what I should cook for dinner. I thought Timothy again, that he would come with me Friday for the showdown with Dave. I *had* asked a lot of him, I knew that. But he'd agreed. The thought held a warmth of its own.

*

I'd just gotten out of the shower when the phone rang. I thought that it would be Dawn calling to tell me they were all in for dinner—in fact, I was so sure of it, that I'd answered the phone that way: “Hey Dawn, what'd she say?”

The pause on the other end unnerved me a moment, and in the brief silence, my mind leaped to the worst possibility: that it was Dave, that he was calling to say God only knew what. “Hello?” I said.

“Joannie?”

I sighed into the phone. “Eddie. Sorry about that—Dawn's supposed to call me tonight and I thought you might be her.”

“Yeah, people confuse us all the time.” Eddie snorted at his own joke. I hadn't had time to buy decent food that day, so I rifled through my freezer to see what frozen entrée was most appealing. None, as it turned out, but I settled on a french bread pizza and promised myself to buy fresh food tomorrow. “Listen,” Eddie said, “I'm calling for two things. Item one: I was thinking about taking Zephyr to Deep Creek on Saturday and doing some training on the cross country course up there. You interested?”

“Yes.” I didn’t give it a moment’s thought: the chance to ride Zephyr outside—better than that, to jump her—and on a day when I knew Timothy was working a double shift? Perfect.

“Good. Meet me at the barn at eight Saturday morning. Item two: I just found out that that new barn in Lewiston with the large indoor is going to have a winter schooling show. Some New Year’s thing, the first of January. I hadn’t planned on showing Zephyr that early, but the quicker we can get her used to the ring the better. Even if she can only do the flat classes, it’s a start.”

“Are you offering me the ride?”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely.” (A show! It’d been years.)

“One other thing: if I’m hauling Zephyr, I can’t take any other horses in the trailer, she’d kick the shit out of them, but I think Jenny should show Hobbes there. She needs the ring experience, too. Could you give him a lift in your trailer? I don’t think he’ll give you any trouble.”

My throat constricted. It was bad enough that I’d have to compete against Jenny, but to have to transport the horse that would beat us in every class? I preheated the toaster oven and arranged my pizza on its undersized baking sheet, collecting the scattered pepperoni from the plastic sack and stacking them on the icy cheese. “You’ve already talked to her?”

“Not yet, but she needs to do a show, and this would be perfect for her.”

I rubbed my thumbs across the calluses on the sides of my fingers, an old nervous habit. The cut sting jolted me, though I hadn’t rubbed hard enough to re-open the wound. “Sure.” My voice was not as enthusiastic as it should have been. “I’d be happy to.”

“Good. Then I’ll see you Thursday.”

I hung up. I quickly showered, trying to remind myself that Zephyr's first show was not bound to be our best anyway, trying to stifle my over-developed need to win. Once in my PJs, I retrieved my bubbling pizza, just in time for the next ring of the phone: Dawn this time. "Dinner's on," she said.

*

Dr. Rivers did not come by Imaging that week. I imagined Cheryl making something of that, twisting it, imagining that I warned him off to hide our love affair, or something equally ludicrous. With me, she was scrupulously polite. Almost servile.

It was a relatively quiet week. People began chatting about Thanksgiving plans, dreading drives, dreading family. I'd almost forgotten it was coming up. I was scheduled to work that night, so I would skip the turkey dinner and just cash in on my parents' leftovers. Mainly, my mind was beyond the holidays, on the show, on what I could do to get Zephyr where she needed to be. Saturday would be good. Zephyr would be outside, she'd have jumps to concentrate on, Eddie would be there: we would make progress. But the show itself, that would be in a ring, and that was not our strength. I tried to imagine a flat class, circling amongst the masses of other competitors, trying to prevent her kicking another horse or rider. If, somehow, we managed to place, would Zephyr bite the ribbon girl before I could warn her to stay clear? Sure, we would tie the red string in her tail, the signal of a kicker, but how many people here would even know what that meant? Idaho schooling shows were filled with farm kids on farm horses: solid, slow animals who did as they were told with little fire or flash.

When I wasn't thinking about the show, I was thinking about Dave. I tried to imagine his response to Timothy, but, in my head, I could never quite construct a scenario that felt plausible. Dave would say something, but what and how? Would he laugh out some nasty comment,

something that would sound like a joke to everyone, something that I alone could decrypt? If they knew the truth, if they found out, how long would everyone hate me? All uncomfortable, unsolvable riddles that I pushed to the back of my mind with more thoughts of the show, of training, of Zephyr, of stifling her brutality.

When Friday night came, Timothy showed up at my house early—almost as soon as I was off work. His jaw was tense and set, his eyes focused on anything on which they fell. It was a look I'd recognized both from the hospital and the show ring: the resolution of someone who, come hell or high water, would get through this. He spoke little, joked less (though I was desperately trying to lighten the mood). I felt almost giddy, anticipating the coming lightness where concern had weighed heavy. I couldn't stop smiling.

"It'll all be over soon," I said. Timothy's eyes turned to me, darkened, penetrated.

"I had a dream about you last night," he said.

I sidled up to him and put my arm around his waist. "Oh yeah?"

He remained solemn, distant in spite of my closeness. "It did not end well." He offered no explanation.

By the time we began our walk to El Mercado, Timothy was increasingly withdrawn, almost sullen, and I suspected that he was annoyed with my levity. Still, everything seemed like a joke to me. Mean thoughts crossed my mind: a quick twist of the foot and I could trip him, send him suddenly sprawling onto the frozen sidewalk. I could take down two men in one night. Haa-ha. Take that. Except that I didn't really want to take Timothy down. I wanted just the opposite: I wanted him to lighten up, for God's sake.

El Mercado was tropically hot compared to the cold air outside. We quickly unwound ourselves from our scarves and pulled off our mittens and coats. Dawn and Russ, Dave and

Jenny had beaten us there but were still waiting for a table. Their four faces turned to me for explanation of the extra body. “This is Timothy Llewellyn,” was all I said. Dawn got up, offered a quick smile and a sly look, and mumbled something about changing the number of people for the table. She nudged me hard in the ribs as she stood to confer with the hostess, a nudge which I took as a sign both of her approval and of her chagrin that I hadn’t said anything.

Jenny, on the other hand, beamed like a new mother. So proud. She reached out and shook his hand vigorously. Warmth radiated from her. After introducing herself, she asked what Timothy did for a living, and when he said he was a student and worked at Rosauers, she looked at me, smiling, and said, “You’ve been keeping secrets.”

I hazarded a glance at Dave, who was looking out the glass door at the lit parking lot where snow was beginning to fall. A bald-tired car fishtailed through a turn, its bumper inches shy of a parked truck. “We’ve only just started seeing each other,” I said.

I felt Dawn standing at my back, and the next thing I knew, her voice was hot in my ear. “Details,” she hissed. “I want details.” I only nodded slightly, knowing that that conversation, at least, could wait.

The hostess called our name and led us to the table—tables, I should say, as they had pulled two small tables together to accommodate us. Both wobbled, and Dave busied himself folding beer mats from an uncleared table nearby, shoving them under the tables’ feet for stability. Russ introduced the rest of the table to Timothy, following the string of names by saying that there would be a quiz later on that evening.

I smiled. “I wonder if anyone in the history of social etiquette has ever been introduced to a group of people without being threatened with a quiz?”

“Well,” Russ said, not missing a beat, laying on his thickest accent, “I aint one to be remiss in my social etiquette.” He ran his hand through his crew cut, shining in the track lighting of the restaurant.

Dawn jumped in. “Hell no, neither one of us has ever been accused of that. Not like some, who fail to tell their friends about new love interests.”

I only shrugged. Dave shoved a final beer mat under the table leg, and sat back up. Whether his face was red from bending low or from anger, I couldn’t say. Whatever he was feeling, he was keeping it to himself.

The warming smell of refried beans and Spanish rice permeated the air, and I leaned back in my chair and inhaled deeply. Timothy struck up a conversation with Russ, comparing past jobs they had had in construction. Timothy had never told me that he’d worked in construction before, and I tried to picture him in an orange helmet and vest, driving the roller. I watched him talk, his growing animation, fascinated by all that I didn’t know. His solemnity had melted into warm smiles and laughter. Dave, who surely could have added his own work stories, stayed silent. Soon, Timothy and Russ were comparing worst construction jobs, then worst jobs in general, and soon the topic was open to the table, everyone comparing.

Mine was easy: Hardee’s, hands down. It wasn’t so much the 5AM-1PM shift that seemed to always extend to 2 or 3 in the afternoon so I could help cover more of the lunch rush; it wasn’t the grease that clung to clothing and hair; it wasn’t the pay (a measly \$4.50 an hour then); it wasn’t even the slimeball manager who took advantage of my dough-covered hands to pass his palms over my ass whenever he squeezed between the hot biscuit ovens and the dough rolling board where I’d be at work. It was a path he found more reasons to take than could possibly have been called for, but he never went further than his cheap thrill. No, I knew

Hardee's would win this because fast food always wins for worst job ever, even though, in truth, the job I took in order to quit Hardee's (retail in the mall clothing store) was far more boring and paid the same minimum hourly wage and left me exposed to the public instead of sheltered in the kitchen. Retail, even in Christmas rush with a bitchy manager, doesn't appeal to the sympathies like fast food.

Jenny, having never worked a job, had to opt out. Timothy went with the Casino, though he admitted to being well-paid there. "I was the whitest Indian on the place, so I got tipped well," he said. Russ was a busboy at a Bonanza steakhouse—though his offer of this as worst job evoked a howl of protest from Dawn, whom he'd met there (she was a waitress). The server came for our drink order before Dave could be asked. I desperately wanted a beer, but one would lead to many, and I needed to be clear-headed in the morning. "Water," I said, and shrugged to the table, "Eddie's asked me to ride Zephyr cross country at Deep Creek tomorrow." Jenny nodded and ordered a daiquiri, but Dawn joined me in ordering only water.

I lifted an eyebrow at her when the server left. "I know why I'm not drinking," I said, "but I never thought I'd see the day when you didn't order a Bud."

Dawn tilted her chin down and smiled towards Russ, then looked at each of us. "Russ and I have some news to share," she said.

I looked at Jenny, who'd grown pink with excitement, jumping to the same inevitable conclusion as the rest of us—the only reason I could think of for Dawn's abstinence.

"I'm pregnant," Dawn said, shrugging her shoulders.

We were quiet only for a moment while the news settled. I balled my paper napkin and chucked it at her head, grinning like an idiot. "You accuse me of having secrets, and you've got an undisclosed bun in the oven?"

Dawn shrugged. “Shit, man, I didn’t keep any secrets. I came right out and told you all. Russ and I just wanted to wait until we could tell everyone at once.”

Jenny immediately began in with the barrage of questions: when was she due? How long had they known? Would they find out the sex? Was it planned or unplanned? How was she feeling? Then, after a moment’s pause, “I guess this means no more trail rides for a while.”

Dawn fired up, “Why the hell would it mean that?”

“You can’t ride pregnant.” Jenny paled slightly, her freckles becoming more pronounced against her white skin.

“You bet your sweet ass I can.”

Jenny looked uncomfortable and squirmed slightly in her chair. “Isn’t that a bit, um, dangerous?”

Dawn’s eyes narrowed. “Are you saying I can’t manage my horse?”

Jenny’s hands flew up, as if to block the assault. “No, no. I’m just thinking you won’t want to take any chances.”

Dave, who’d been staring at the tablecloth during all this, spoke. “Aren’t you two supposed to go riding tomorrow?” His voice was low, just loud enough to be audible, more growl than whisper. I didn’t like how he was acting—the ice where I’d expected fire.

Jenny looked at Dawn, her forehead flexed with concern.

Dawn slapped her hand flat on the table. “Damn it, yes we are.”

Jenny was quiet for a moment, deciding. I only watched, wanting to see which would win out: Jenny’s mewling persuasion or Dawn’s adamancy. The waitress returned with a tray of beers, waters, and Jenny’s daiquiri, distributing them quickly. The table crackled with tension.

Russ shoved the lime into the mouth of his Corona and stayed silent, not daring to weigh in on his wife's decision.

Finally, Jenny yielded: "As long as you're ok with it and think it will be all right, then we'll go."

I looked at Timothy and smiled, but he was staring hard at his menu, his face unreadable. I put my hand on his thigh, rubbing the soft, worn cotton of his blue jeans. He glanced at me and smiled the warm heart smile that first drew me to him. I wanted desperately to run my hands through his hair, the silk of each strand slipping through my fingers. I wanted to pull his face to mine and kiss him right then and there for no other reason than that incredible smile.

And I wanted Dave to see it so that he could fully feel the futility of his position.

Nonetheless, I neither stroked Timothy's hair nor kissed him. Not here, not in front of all these eyes. I stored the desire, letting it accumulate along my bones, stretching catlike along the inside of my femurs, burning in my hip sockets. He laid his hand on mine, the warmth of his fingers almost uncomfortably hot. Almost.

Dave broke a tortilla chip in two, snapping my concentration. He liberally scooped salsa onto one of the halves and tossed it back like a shot. He still didn't look at me directly. He followed the second salsa-laden half chip with a slug of beer, then repeated, working methodically through food and drink. I didn't know how to read this. There was nothing apparently hostile in the set of his face, his eyes staring blankly as he ate and drank. To the others, I was sure he appeared to be less social than normal: taciturn, grumpy, but nothing more. Nothing a long day wouldn't explain. Yet there was a latent tension I did not like. Like he was building something, saving something. It hit me that our showdown would not be here, that I would not be the one to decide the terms. My sun was hours from high noon yet; Dave would

pull it off its horizon when he was ready for the fight. The confidence I'd carried like a loaded gun melted in the coolness of his seemingly casual indifference and in the anger that fueled his frozen reserve.

Timothy traced the inside of my index finger. I sat: sensuality and fear fighting within me. I turned to Timothy and smiled, but the concern in his eyes showed how unconvincing my smile was. He glanced quickly at Dave and looked at me again, his gaze more penetrating now. I looked away.

"Where you guys riding tomorrow?" I asked, because it was all I could think to say.

Dawn stared at Russ's beer, the longing for a beer of her own evident. "I don't know. Wherever the spirit moves us."

The table fell silent. So different from that first night out. Jenny laughed but her laugh was short and forced. "I can't believe you're going to have a baby," she said. "I've been trying to convince Dave that it's time for us to start a family, but he always wants to put it off. Maybe this will change your mind, huh?"

My stomach tightened. As much as I was over Dave, as much as I wanted him out of my life, as much as I never wanted to see him again, it tightened.

Dave crunched a chip between white molars. "I doubt it." He looked at Jenny. "Having kids isn't something you do because everyone else is doing it."

The comment struck me as cruel, but if Jenny thought so, she didn't show it. She merely kept rattling on. "He thinks we should build up more of a nest egg first, get some more money into our house before we started adding mouths to feed."

I looked around. "Speaking of which, where is the food? My mouth could stand to be fed."

Jenny laughed again. “We only ordered ten minutes ago.”

It felt like longer, much longer, but I didn’t say so. I stared at the green plaster parrot perched on a brass ring in the corner, the hard gloss of its plumage reflecting the lighting.

Heavy, flightless wings. There was the beak: the long sleek hook, its sharp point. A beak that would never open to bite or speak. I told myself to stop making metaphors. *That damned brass circle enclosing it all. Endless.* Stop.

Jenny was prattling on about her basset hounds, whom she’d trained to run on her treadmill for exercise. I tried to picture it. I imagined them stepping on their own ears as they paddled their short legs, desperately trying to catch up with the machine. I couldn’t decide if it was funny or tragic. The whole night seemed like that. Like I was tripping on my own ears. Exercises in futility, going nowhere. I tried again to shake myself out of my head.

Russ joked about teaching doggy aerobics: the next Jane Fonda tape, if Jane Fonda even still made tapes, which Jenny said she hadn’t done for years. “How long does it take to get a dog in swim suit condition?” Russ asked. “Do they make bikinis for bassets?”

Timothy suggested pin-up shots, maybe a calendar. The comment immediately won Russ’s approval, and he began shouting out possible names for new magazines, calendars, and adult videos. Tits and Bassets. Doggy Style. Timothy suggested a few: Rabid Love. Mutts and Butts. They went on, one-upping each other. Normally, I thought, I would be enjoying this: the challenge to be as raunchy as your creative limits could allow. Tonight, Dave’s teeth pulverizing those god damned chips, crushed any festive instinct. What I wouldn’t have given for a margarita, the ice and the alcohol to numb this.

Jenny’s face was horror struck: the pornographic slurs against her bassets a little too much for her to bear. Dawn stopped laughing long enough to tell Russ to knock it off, and he

and Timothy, still smiling at their mutual wit, complied. I started to worry about Jenny: would Dave, unable to revenge himself on me, vent his aggression on her? Again, I realized how little I knew him, and in that moment, he seemed capable of anything. His white teeth, the hard edge of his jaw as he ate.

Plates of food slid in front of us. I looked at Jenny: “Eddie call you?”

“No. I haven’t talked to him since our lesson.”

I took a bite of pollo asada, letting the charbroiled grill marks of the chicken rest against my tongue for a moment, tasting the wood cinder, chewing, swallowing. “There’s a schooling show in January. He’s going to haul Zephyr for me to ride. If you want to show, I’ll haul Hobbes.”

“A show?”

“Just a small one.” (Another bite.) “It’s not a big deal, but it’s a chance to get out and see what showing is like. See if it’s something you’re interested in.”

“Would I have to jump?”

“There’ll be flat classes and jumping classes. Why? Don’t you want to jump?”

“I don’t know if I’d be ready to jump in a show so soon.”

I didn’t push her, though every atom of my body was screaming at her. She had Hobbes, Hobbes!, and she was scared to jump in a schooling show. Instead, I said, “there’s plenty of time to decide what classes you want to do.” Eddie would surely make her jump. There was no reason not to. I might not be so lucky. A lot depended on tomorrow, and on the jumps we’d practice between now and then. I ran my thumb over the week-old laceration on my finger, now unwrapped but still taped shut with butterfly closures. It was beginning to look as if it might

scar. I thought again of the dead boy and wondered if I was scarring on his behalf, since he hadn't lived long enough to scar.

Dave still concentrated on his food, looking up sometimes at Jenny or Dawn or Russ, even sometimes at Timothy, but never at me. His face was mainly impassive, though he'd begun to force a smile at jokes. When he smiled, I felt scared. Irrationally, totally terrorized. There was something less than human in that smile, though I couldn't think of another animal that smiled besides humans. I reminded myself that he was smiling because he, too, was trying not to draw attention to his discomfort, but I couldn't quite convince myself.

When the food was done, no one felt inclined to linger. Dawn, without a beer to sip, looked restless. I made excuses for Timothy and me, saying that I had to be at the barn early for the ride to Spokane with Eddie and that Timothy had work. We needed to get to bed. Dave's eyes flashed when I said this—glared, I would say, except that the fury seemed gone before I was sure it was there. Again, I found myself running my thumb over the cut finger, the old nervous habit.

Outside, Timothy inhaled a long breath of icy air and sighed. "Nice people, your friends."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I like Russ and Dawn a lot. Real easy-going, down-to-earth."

I nodded, pleased.

"And Jenny's not so bad—I thought she'd be worse from your description."

"Did I describe her harshly?"

Timothy ignored the question. Instead, he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me against his own warm body, the sides of our hips grinding against each other as we walked

until we fell into pace. “Dave, though. Man. I’m still not sure about Dave. You’d better watch yourself.”

I didn’t answer. What was there to say?

*

I woke up to the Saturday alarm, the naked skin of my back pressed against Timothy’s chest, his breath in my curls. I’d been wanting this moment for weeks now: it was the whole point of last night’s dinner: a confrontation that lead to freedom. Yet I woke with the same uneasiness I’d had at El Mercado’s the night before. Here was Timothy, his chest warm on my back, arms encircling my arms, legs interlaced with my legs, yet Dave was still in my head, insistent as the buzzer on the clock radio. I began to wonder just what I had to do to get rid of him for good.

Timothy stretched out at my back. “Snooze,” he muttered. “Hit snooze.”

“Snooze is for the weak willed,” I said, turning off the alarm. “It’s time to get up.”

“What do you mean, the weak willed? Everyone hits snooze.”

I ignored the question. If I hit snooze, I was liable to start sleeping through my alarm. I learned long ago working those 5am biscuit shifts to get up when the alarm went off the first time, or else I’d turn over and sleep my shift away—not an option, since my own food and board as well as Foxy’s depended on that meager salary.

I turned the bedside lamp on and flipped over to face Timothy. He squinted against the light, “God damn.”

I pushed my hands into his hair, letting the strands slide between my fingers as I knew they would. His black hair shone in the lamplight, an animal thing. He relaxed under the petting, and I moved my body closer. “We’re waking up, huh?” he said.

“Sure are.”

He slid his arms around my back and pulled me closer still. “What’s my incentive?”

I traced my fingers down his shoulder. “What do you want?” I asked, playing dumb to his desire, to my desire. And then, just as suddenly, I was thinking of the window at my back, blinds closed. Who knew what was on the other side? What if Dave was out there watching now? Timothy’s hands were on my thighs and there was not a single part of me that didn’t want him just where he was, but Dave! What if he was sitting on the street now, parked in his pickup? I concentrated on my breathing. I was being irrational. Dave would be home with Jenny now, where he belonged, freeing me to be with Timothy in every way I wanted to be. I tried to push him from my head, but the image held faster.

Kisses, up my neck and on my earlobes. I tilted my head to encourage more. But along with the erotic came the fear: the jugular I was exposing. My hands kneaded the sinewy muscles of Timothy’s back, no lack of strength there. His hands, now on my ass and pulling me closer, closer, our bodies locked, and all was heat, and breath, and sweat—no distance now except for the thought of Dave, always fucking Dave, sitting like some smirking leprechaun in the middle of my thoughts.

My body, thank God, acted independent of my scattered mind and responded to Timothy as it should. He was doing everything right, hitting all the right spots, moving all the right places at all the right times. I watched him through half-slit eyes: his own eyes were closed and his face intent. A warmth was welling within me as my own muscles clamped down on him. I was close, I knew, and any other morning it would have been enough, but not this morning. I panted, I begged, I lied some sensual groans; in short, I faked it. And when all was done, and Timothy

and I were again cuddled against each other, mostly what I felt was anger, both at Dave for being in my mind and at myself for not being able to put this more important matter over my mind.

Timothy kissed my back.

“None of that now,” I said in my sexiest tone, “or I’ll never be able to get out of this bed.”

“Precisely what I had in mind.”

I sighed and enjoyed the affection for another moment. “No, no.” I lifted myself out of the sheets. “Your powers are strong, but I do, in fact, have to get out of bed this morning. And so do you, Mr. Double Shift.”

Timothy moved his hand to my breast.

“Now that’s just not fair,” I said, disentangling myself and pulling away. Timothy was tucked down in the warm pillows and blankets, grinning at me. He looked completely comfortable and content. I returned his smile and shivered. The chill of the room against my skin made it all the more difficult to shuck away the covers, but I had an hour before I needed to meet Eddie at the barn, and I wanted a good breakfast to sustain me. I pulled on underwear, a bra, some long johns, and padded into the kitchen in wool socks to cook oatmeal and start the coffee pot.

Timothy was not long behind me, fully dressed and ready. He looked at the coffee, still brewing. “Got any juice?”

“Check the fridge; help yourself.”

The fluorescent lighting flickered overhead, as white and bleak as the morning would be cold. This would probably be the last day we’d be able to jump Zephyr outside. Soon, the

ground would stay frozen, despite sunlight, and the footing would be too hard on her ligaments and tendons for the impact of landing.

I pulled out bowls and spooned two servings of oatmeal, then looked at Timothy. “Are you a brown or white sugar man?”

“On oatmeal? Maple syrup.”

I looked at him. “I always knew you were a weirdo.”

“Or, brown sugar if you’re one of the Mrs. Butterworth Aunt Jemima fake-o types.”

“Oh no, I’ve got syrup. Real syrup, that is.” I pulled the small bottle of Vermont maple from the cupboard. “I just usually eat it on pancakes, like every other rational person.”

“Ahhh, but rational people are seldom this sexy, right?”

I laughed. “You’ve got me there.”

“And you should hardly be critical: is that *butter* you’re stirring into your bowl?”

“Of course.”

Timothy only shook his head in mock despair. I ate an ample spoonful with relish, poured a tall glass of milk, and headed for the table. We ate quickly, pausing midway to pour the more coffee. I still imagined Dave’s truck outside in the parking lot. I felt sure he was there, watching me, lying in wait. I couldn’t shake the thought, but I didn’t tell Timothy this. Instead, I teased and made bad jokes to cover my anxiety. I didn’t want to hear the “I told you so” I was beginning to feel I richly deserved. I didn’t even want to see that thought flash through the gold of his eyes.

Timothy washed the dishes while I pulled on heavy breeches, a long sleeved tee shirt, a fleece pullover, and a coat (top layers I could easily strip as I grew hot). My commuter mug of black coffee greeted me on my return to the kitchen. 7:45, time to go. We kissed at the door,

saying little. Timothy wished me luck, and I asked him to call when he got off work. With that, he grabbed his bike and I started my truck. Dave was nowhere in sight.

*

The trip to Deep Creek was fairly uneventful, punctuated only by Zephyr's kicking the trailer at any stoplights. It had taken us over a half an hour to load her—Eddie trying solo at first while I grabbed my tack, then both of us working together, and finally, succeeding with a helping hand from Connie, who had come out when she heard the scrambling and cursing coming from the barn. After we got Zephyr in and Eddie was tying her, Connie told me that Jenny had called her last night, and related Dawn's news from dinner. "I guess she wanted me to talk Dawn out of riding today," Connie said.

"You going to try?" I looked at her sideways.

"Hell no. You think I've got a death wish? I'd sooner ride Zephyr cross country."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I said, but I couldn't suppress a laugh.

"I promised that I'd ride out with them, though, to put her mind at ease. In case anything happens, you know?"

"Smart," I said. Eddie finished double-checking the trailer hitch and jumped into the driver's seat. "Guess that's my cue to go. Have a good trail ride today."

"You, too," Connie said, "and stay safe." She looked me absolutely level in the eye as she said this, and I nodded to show I understood and that I would be careful.

But once we got to Deep Creek, Zephyr acted like a perfect role model of a horse. It was as if, somewhere on the road to Spokane, someone switched out Zephyr's personality for Foxy's. She didn't even kick as I tightened the girth. Instead, she held her head high, ears flicking in

every direction, nostrils flaring and holding deep breaths of foreign air, eyes intent on the horizon, but listening to every cue I gave her and responding instantly.

She had an instinct for jumping. Even without my aids, she shortened and lengthened strides as needed to always jump from the perfect distance. When Eddie had me ride her closer up to a fence, she responded with equally clean, round jumps, and when he had us lengthen, she maintained her bascule, curling her body around the fence even at those flattening distances. She had more talent than Foxy. I couldn't deny it now, and I half-wished Eddie had never witnessed it. Zephyr's value increased that day. What did I care, though? I didn't want to buy Zephyr. Except that, in that moment, I did.

It hit me, that day, riding in the field, that this was exactly the type of horse I should be looking for: one that had been written off—and for good reason—but that still had enough conformation, brains, and ability to be retrained. Sure, Zephyr would always be vicious; she would always bite, kick, and generally maim anyone who came in reach, but that was exactly what brought her into my price range. I started mentally calculating how high she might go and whether she'd ever be suitable in the ring, the two big factors in her price range yet to be determined. If she could be a grand prix horse, if she could jump the big fences, and if she would do it in the close quarters of the show ring, then all bets were off as to her price.

Experienced riders at that level were always looking for talent and would always be willing to overlook temperament flaws as long as they didn't stop the horse from winning. No, if I wanted Zephyr, I had to play for her when those factors were still unknown, when there was an element of risk in buying her. *If* Eddie would go for it.

I began my bid for Zephyr on the ride home, after another forty-five minute trial getting her to load. "What do you reckon Zephyr would fetch on the open market now?" I asked.

Eddie flicked a glance at me, then stared hard at the road. “Tough to say. She’s not ready to be sold yet.”

I let the subject drop a bit while we pulled through an Arby’s and ordered lunch. The fries weren’t quite ready, and Zephyr beat on the trailer sides to make known her impatience while we waited.

Sandwiches in hand and on the road once more, I tried again. “She’s still got a lot of rough spots. I wonder if she’ll ever totally train out of them.”

Eddie shrugged. “Probably not totally. She’ll never be a kid’s horse, but she’s got more ability than your average kid’s horse, too.”

I nodded and made my move: “Would you consider selling her now, to the right buyer?”

“Do you have a buyer in mind?”

I looked him in the eye, knowing he was a better reader of eyes than I’d ever been. “You know I do.”

Eddie smiled and shook his head. “Yes, I do, but you’ve got Foxfire’s board to pay for, and I didn’t think you had enough saved yet for a horse. You were complaining about that at the last lesson.”

Foxfire was a problem, no doubt about it. Much as I loved him, I could double the rate at which I was saving if I didn’t have his monthly board bill. While he was alive, he was a financial liability. Still, there was nothing to do about that. “You’ve known me a long time, Eddie. You know if you were willing to take a good sized chunk of a down payment, I could pay the rest over time.” I was talking out of my ass. With two board bills, I had no clue where I could come up with more to pay. “Maybe you wouldn’t need to part with her right away,” I added, “but what if we talk again in January, before the show?”

“Why not after?”

“Because you know as well as I do that if she does well at that show, you’re raising the price.”

“Maybe. But if you’re so confident she’ll do well, shouldn’t I raise the price now?”

“I don’t know she’s going to do well.” I paused and swallowing, half afraid of how I was committing myself to a horse who’d been more problems than any other animal I’d ever ridden. “I’m not sure she’ll show well, but it’s a risk I’ll take. And I’m not willing to risk losing her to some rich prick if she does do well. I know I can ride her. I know if we work together, she’ll keep getting better. And that benefits you just as much as it does me. There isn’t a person around who won’t know what you did with her, how far she came since you bought her, what you did as a trainer. Dawn and Connie alone would spread the word—you know they both think we’re nuts to be putting any time or money into her.”

I was getting worked up. I looked at my sandwich, still in my hand with only one bite taken from it. Eddie laughed and shook his head. “You make a persuasive case, Joannie, I’ll give you that. I’ll think about it, but no promises. This mare could end up being worth a lot.”

This mare, he said. I knew what that meant, reminding me that if nothing else, she could be bred. I wondered if he was thinking of keeping her for himself, breeding her to top stallions and training the foals. There could be boatloads of money there, *if* she threw decent foals. Another if; another unknown; another hope.

I ate my sandwich and thought about Dawn and Jenny, wondering if their ride had gone smoothly. It was like Jenny to have called Connie: thoughtful, interfering. She was so cautious. She would stop riding when she got pregnant, whenever Dave gave in to that request. I wondered what the story was there. They said they’d talked about it; he’d wanted to wait, and

she didn't. How long had those discussions been going on? Was Hobbes part of the deal to put off having a family? A way to make Jenny less impatient? Dave would put children off as long as possible: another tie to bind him to the life and wife he wanted to escape.

I thought about my own uncut ties and how I would release myself. The phantom of Dave's truck. A trick of the imagination.

Timothy. His endless shift. Would I see him tonight when he got off, or would it be too late?

And then, Dr. Rivers. Marry that guy and I'd never had to worry about being able to afford a sport horse. I'd just have to hate the rest of my life.

Timothy, his endless shift, our endless waiting. I *would* see him tonight; I'd make sure of that. Go somewhere in my mind where the phantom truck couldn't follow and love Timothy like I wanted to. Leave Dave to go and have a million babies with his perfect homemaker; leave Dr. Rivers to find another set of comforting arms. I knew who I wanted. Timothy. His endless shift.

The sky was dark on the horizon near Moscow. "Brush fire," Eddie said.

"Weird time of year for one," I said. We'd had rain not a week ago.

"Well, something's burning."

The smoke got thicker, spreading dark fingers across the sky, blotting out the sun so that the air seemed dusk-filled, though it was only an hour or two past noon. Coming through Pullman, ash began to fall on the truck. We were only a mile or so from the barn, and the air was getting unbreathable. "If this is a brush fire," I said, "it's the biggest one I've ever seen."

"No, you're right. This is something else. They must be putting it out, though, or else the smoke wouldn't be this black."

We pulled on, over the crests of the hills and into the oily haze. “I hate to think of Foxy breathing this shit in all afternoon,” I said, but Eddie was silent now, his face set and immovable. It was his silence that did it: I began to panic. “You don’t think this is barn-fire smoke, do you?” Eddie said nothing, but the flashing lights at the end of the gravel road spoke on his behalf: police cars. Police cars blocking the road to Connie’s, and over the crest where the barn was nestled, more lights flashing, lighting up the plumes of smoke.

Eddie pulled up to the side of the police vehicles and waited while a slim and very young officer approached the car. Eddie nodded to the trailer, “This horse I’m hauling goes to Connie Thornton’s place.”

“I’m sorry, sir. No horses going there today. We can’t let anyone through.”

My heart beat against my ribs. I felt caged in the truck. Zephyr banged on the trailer and I wanted to bang with her.

“What happened?” Eddie watched the young officer from underneath his beaten cap, gauging him, figuring out exactly how much he could ask, how far he could push.

“Not sure yet. Can’t say.” The cop was little more than a boy, large blue eyes as untroubled as a pool.

“Barn fire?”

“Yes sir.”

“Any horses killed?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I’d tell you if I knew.” I hated him for his ignorance. The walkie talkie strapped to his shoulder unused. So easy to ask a question, to get an answer.

Eddie turned to me. “We’ll take Zephyr to my place and come back with the trailer. Maybe the road will be open by then. If Foxy needs a place, you know he has one with me until Connie gets fences up.”

The *if* did it. *If* Foxy needs a place. “I’m sorry, Eddie,” I said, and I jumped from the truck and ran through the cars and down the road. I could hear the officers shouting after me, but I didn’t stop. Panting in the smoke-choked air, coughing as I ran, I sprinted my way down the gravel road. Or tried to sprint. It was an unforgiving surface to run on. Recently and thickly resurfaced, it gave way beneath my feet like sand. My toes sank as they tried to push off. It was like running in a nightmare, going nowhere.

My lungs were burning by the time I crested the hill, the hot cinders scalding as I breathed. The lungs felt heavy and soot coated within my rib cage. My fleece over-shirt had gathered soot and turned from blue to grey. Through the smoke, I saw Connie pacing behind the fire trucks, the blackened frame of the barn teetering against the dim horizon. One charred rafter fell, and then the next five. “Connie,” I called, but the smoke ate my voice. “Connie!”

She turned. Black lines ran down her face where tears had mixed with ash, but she was dry eyed now. “Joannie,” she said. “It’s gone.” She held her hand out to the place where her barn, her dream, had stood, as if her words needed explanation.

“You’ll rebuild,” I said. In that moment, I didn’t care about the barn and everything Connie had built for herself after the death of her husband. They were only buildings; she would build again. “Foxy?” I asked, but the words clung to the ash coating my throat. I coughed and tried again: “Foxy?”

Connie’s face flexed in anguish, “Joannie, I’m sorry.”

“Just tell me he was out to pasture.” I was desperate now.

“You know how he gets when Bill isn’t with him—so frantic and worried. With all the other horses gone, I left him in the stall while we rode out. I figured we’d put them out after the trail ride this morning. When we saw the smoke, we came right home, but the barn was already burning.” She stopped. The barn was already burning; it would be foolish to run into a burning barn, so much tinder. If they weren’t there in the first minute of the fire, there would be no saving anything.

I felt my face harden, and I turned to the black skeleton of the building. That was it, then. He was dead. Only, he couldn’t be dead. I cleared my throat, “do they know how it started?”

“If they do, they’re not talking yet.”

“You’ll rebuild.” It was more command than question, but Connie answered it anyway.

“Yes, I’ll rebuild.”

I paused. “No chance that Foxfire got out?”

“Joannie, I wish there was, but I don’t see how he could have. The first thing Dawn did when we got back was to turn right around and ride out, searching the hills to see if he’d gotten out, to see if he’d run, but she couldn’t see a sign of him. She looked for an hour at least—didn’t want to give up—but the firemen ordered her out. This air is dangerous. You shouldn’t be here either.”

“You’re here.”

Connie didn’t answer. She’d lost her barn; I’d lost my horse; neither of us were going anywhere. I looked at Connie, “Can I use your phone?”

She nodded towards the house. “The door’s unlocked. Help yourself.”

I crossed the gravel drive and let myself in. Dawn answered the phone on the second ring. Her voice was hoarse from smoke and sorrow. I wondered if the inhaled smoke would hurt the baby and hoped it wouldn't. "It's Joannie," I said.

"Joannie." She was quiet for a moment. "Joannie, I looked all over the place for that damned horse, but I couldn't find a sign of him. Not the faintest outline of a hoof print."

"I know." I paused. "I don't even really know why I called."

"It's ok," Dawn said. "I'm glad you did."

"Shit. What the fuck am I going to do now?" I closed my eyes, but they continued to burn with smoke and dry air.

"I don't know. But you'll figure it out."

I didn't say anything for a moment. There was nothing to say. "What happened?" I finally asked.

"I've got no clue. We left the barn, everything was fine. We're about twenty, twenty-five minutes out, and Connie sees the smoke. We didn't know whose place was burning, but we turned tail and galloped home. Connie jumped off Bill at the house and Jenny held him while she called 9-1-1. We all knew it was too late, though. You should have seen the flames. I've never seen fire like that. I thought she'd lose every pasture, her house, her outbuildings, but the fire trucks were there before she'd hung up the phone. I think one of the neighbors must have seen the smoke and called before we got the chance. I don't know what happened to Jenny and Connie after that; I took off to see if I could find Foxy." Dawn paused. She didn't say the search had been hopeless from the start, but we both knew it was. "Finally, the police tracked me down and ordered me home, and I went. I'm sorry, Joannie, I should have kept looking."

"No." I cleared my throat again. "No, there was no point."

“The firefighters said, if Foxy was in that barn, they’ll find him. If not, Joannie I swear, I’ll be out in those hills first thing in the morning looking.”

I swallowed hard. “He’s dead. I appreciate it, but I know he’s dead. I knew before we hit the second hill from the barn, before we were even sure it was Connie’s place that was burning. Somehow, I could feel him gone.” It wasn’t entirely true, but it was what Dawn would need to hear, and the story I needed to tell.

Dawn was quiet.

“You heard from Jenny since?” I asked.

“Yeah. Actually, she just called. Weird thing: I guess Dave wasn’t home when she got there, and she can’t figure out where he’s got to. No note or anything. He’ll turn up, though.”

The hand that held the receiver began to shake violently. “Hmph,” I said, mainly because I didn’t trust my voice to say anything else. Then, “Listen, Dawn, I’ve got to go for now, but I’ll call you again tomorrow.”

“Sure thing,” she said. “And, Joannie?”

“Yeah?”

“Take care of yourself.”

I hung up. If there was one thing I could do, I thought, it was take care of myself. But I hadn’t taken enough care of Foxfire.

I walked out to Connie again. The firefighters were cleaning up, now, coiling the hoses and putting their gear back in the truck. They were surreal, somehow, in their blackened yellow coats, the broad bands of reflective tape glittering in the half-light of the smoke-filtered afternoon. A man in uniform and a hard hat was starting to look around the exterior of the building, the inspector I guessed.

Connie looked on next to me. “I guess there’s nothing more to do here,” she said. She looked at me. “We saved your truck, by the way.”

I looked over at Connie, her skin and hair grey with accumulated ash. “I hadn’t even thought of it.”

“Good thing you left the keys in the ignition.”

I nodded. Connie was always reminding people to leave the keys in their cars in case she needed to move them to get equipment through. I’d left my truck unlocked in this parking lot at every visit since her first request, years ago. I’d even kept the habit in New Jersey, where people thought I was crazy and told me I was begging for it to get stolen. No one ever stole it.

I watched the uniformed man, squatting now by a rafter. A fireman came over to talk to Connie, and I walked closer to the trucks to get a better look at the building. A second firefighter stopped me before I could see anything. “Ma’am, it’s too dangerous to go any closer right now.”

I looked at him. His face was prematurely wrinkled, from the heat I guessed. The soot made the lines stand out in bold relief, and his eyes, too, the same icy blue as Dave’s. I looked away. “My horse was in that barn,” I said.

“I’m sorry.” His eyes showed he was. I was thankful, at least, for that small show of sympathy.

I ran the back of my hand over my gritty forehead. I could feel my hand shaking and tried, again, to swallow my emotion. “Any idea how it started?”

“I can’t say, but there’ll be a report when we know.”

I nodded and walked away. I waved to Connie and got in my truck, its hood covered in an inch of ash. I used the snow scraper to clear the windows and cranked the engine. I thought

the ash might have made starting it difficult, but it must have lain only on the surface. I pulled out of the drive and went home.

*

The trouble with going home was that I had no clue what to do with myself once I got there. I showered, did laundry, vacuumed, but mainly, I felt angry. I did chores angry. I sat on the sofa and watched the blank television screen angry. By the time I should have been fixing dinner, I was filled with rage, only, I couldn't figure out who I was angry with. Not Connie (who wasn't home to stop the fire), not Dawn (who didn't find him), not Eddie (who'd lured me away from where I could protect my Foxy), not Timothy (who wasn't here to console me—who was working his double—who didn't yet know I needed consoling). I was feverishly chopping lettuce when I finally realized who I was angry with: me.

The shock sent me staggering on my heels, like a punch to the gut. It was my fault. I sank into a kitchen chair and looked at the floor. If Dave was behind this, I was the one who had set Dave off. The idea felt more like fact than speculation. Dave had to be behind it. He'd set up everything so perfectly, sending Jenny out with Dawn when he knew I'd be away. Sitting there crunching his chips in that slow, methodical way, thinking, planning. He'd even found an excuse to get Connie away from home. Jenny, so worried about Dawn: the casual suggestion to call, and of course, Connie would come along for the ride. Everything, calculated, planned, executed.

Every sign had been there for me to read, and I hadn't read them. Instead, I was off riding Zephyr, scheming to buy her, half-wishing Foxfire dead so I could afford her. Dave had granted that terrible wish. I was implicated in Foxy's death, a partner to Dave's crime. I heard Foxfire's screams in my ears, the ones I wasn't present to hear: his call for me, screaming for me

to let him out of the barn, to save him, to stop the blinding smoke, to stop the burning. I was his owner; I should have been his protector. That was my job, my end of the bargain we'd struck with every faithful, obedient move he'd made for me his whole life. Instead, in his final moments, I'd been wanting him out of the way so I could buy something newer, younger.

I found myself sobbing. I wanted to get out, but there was no where to go to. There wasn't a place where I wouldn't still be locked in my own head. I pushed my face into my hands, stretched my skin tight across my skull, and willed myself out, but all that came out were the sobs.

Outside, neighbors passed, laughing, in front of the door. I wanted to run after them, to hit them, to keep hitting them for the insult of their laughter. *Stop it*, I told myself, squeezing my eyes tight and trying to command even an element of rational thought. I opened the fridge and pulled out a cold head of lettuce: something I could chop with a large, sharp knife.

The phone rang. I cleared my throat and answered.

"I just got off the phone with Connie." (It was Eddie.) "She told me about Foxfire. Joan, I just want you to know how sorry I am to hear it."

I tried to think of words to answer, but nothing came. There was nothing to say.

Eddie broke the silence. "Anyway, I just wanted you to know that. He was a great horse—one in a million. You were blessed to have the time with him that you had. I'll let you go for now, but we'll plan on doing your lesson at my place this week. I think it's best you get back in the saddle sooner rather than later."

I mumbled my thanks to Eddie but made no commitments to show for the lesson. I couldn't think of riding another horse right now, especially Zephyr.

I finished chopping the lettuce, tomato, and black olives for my salad, crumbled liberal feta over the top and doused it all with Greek dressing. I ate in front of the TV, watching *Dirty Harry*. I ate without tasting, chewing and swallowing out of an effort of will, because I, like Connie, would have to rebuild. The sobs locked in my throat threatened to block my efforts, but I swallowed anyway.

I would have to call my parents that night and tell them about Foxy, but I couldn't think about that right now. I didn't want to hear it: their sympathy, that sadness. Too many reminders of all I'd lost.

Again, the phone rang. I thought at first it might be Timothy calling on a break, but it was Connie again. "Joan," she said, her voice thick with whiskey, abrupt and slurring.

"Hi Connie." I stabbed lettuce onto my fork.

"The fire department just left."

"Any word on what happened?" On the television, Clint ran from phone to phone.

"No—something about an official report later, but they were asking weird questions. The cops are still nosing around out there."

I stopped playing with my food. "Questions about what?"

"They found a truck in the barn." Connie stopped to burp. "They asked me if I knew anyone who drove a late model Dodge full-sized pick-up."

"Jenny's husband." I dropped my fork.

"Why would it be her husband? Two guys at PacBell drive new Dodge trucks, and I beat one for the last promotion. I bet it's that son of a bitch. Jealous fuck. That's who I told the cops to check out. Or there's that jerk down the road, always sure our horses have been on his piece of shit property, tearing up his fields. I wouldn't call his Dodge 'new,' but it could be that guy."

“But did they find any bodies?”

“I told you, they didn’t say. No report yet. They wouldn’t even tell me if they found Foxfire. I just saw the black hull of a smoking truck in the middle of what used to be my beautiful barn, and when they asked me about the Dodge, well, I can put two and two together.”

“Keep me posted,” I said.

“Will do,” said Connie. She fumbled the phone back onto the kitchen wall, the sound of hook on plastic receiver echoing in my ear. I stared at the screen where Clint staggered up a desert hill to a glowing cross, a yellow duffel bag heavy with money in his straining hand.

I was shaking. I pictured the truck sitting there in the barn aisle, right outside Foxy’s stall. I could see Dave starting the fire—did he start it right in front of Foxy or did he light the barn ends and wait until it burned inward? I saw him, listening to Foxy scream, relishing the pain he was causing to my horse and to me, and smiling: all those damned white teeth glittering in the firelight. His revenge: not to inflict some short-lived physical pain onto me, but to hurt my horse, to hurt me permanently by robbing me of what I loved most. And I couldn’t do a damned thing about it. He’d robbed me even of the showdown, the bitter fight at the end of it all.

Timothy—I went to the phone to make sure he was still at work, to make sure Dave hadn’t paid him a visit as well.

The phone rang as I was picking it up to dial: Timothy, as if he felt my unspoken need for him. “Hey, cutie,” he said. “Just wondering if you were back, and if you wanted to get together again tonight after my shift?” I couldn’t answer. The sound of his voice, the relief it gave and then the flooding return of sorrow, choked me. I had no words; they’d abandoned me. I sobbed into the phone. I was incoherent. I realized there was no way I could form words to tell him what had happened, and I hung up.

Another thing to feel guilty about: hanging up on Timothy. I lay back on my couch; Clint lay back on his lieutenant's couch, arm bandaged from the showdown, already looking for the next fight. I thought of Jennifer, of watching *Dirty Harry* for the first time. We'd rented it one night because it was cheap, one of the dollar rentals, and we were bored. We spent the next week reciting Clint's lines and doing impressions of Scorpio's crazed laughter. That Saturday, we'd rented the full run, *Dirty Harry* straight through to *The Dead Pool*, eating red licorice ropes and popcorn, soaking up bravado and cold rebellion of Harry Callahan, as if two teenaged girls from Idaho could have anything in common with a San Francisco badass. I turned my head to the sofa back and buried it in cushions so the neighbors would not hear me crying. I'd lost that Jenny, and now I'd good as killed Foxy with my own attempts at bravado. Behind me, Clint asked Scorpio if he felt lucky. I pushed the sofa cushions over my ears. Never had I been so utterly defeated, so incapable of ever getting off that couch.

I stared into the dark corner of the sofa, where arm meets back, remembering Foxfire in his prime, back when he could have jumped anything. I felt the way he moved under me, so smooth and perfect. I could feel the warmth of a May afternoon, the spring breezes wafting the fresh scent of grass over the hills. A perfect moment in time. There had never been anything more to wish for. He'd given me that day and hundreds more like it, but when he needed me, I'd been riding Zephyr. The nub of the fabric of that old sofa was rough against my face, but I didn't turn. I deserved it: that roughness. It was a payment.

The video had rolled through the credits and now played only static, but I didn't turn. I didn't turn when the front door opened. I didn't turn towards the sound of heavy feet on carpet. It could have been a thief, a murderer. It could have been Dave. That would be the movie ending. At this point, I couldn't bring myself to care. Let him kill me. Let it be over.

The couch sank behind me, and I felt hands warm on my back, turning me. My eyes met eyes: Timothy. He didn't ask what was wrong; he only held me as I choked out the story, feeling insubstantial, paper-thin, in his strong hands. I would have to tell it to him again, later, before he could understand what I said, and even then, his questions kept me backing up, getting the order of events straight. I stared at his old flannel shirtsleeves, trying to find order for my thoughts in its time-softened geometry. Through it all, he held me.

I don't remember falling asleep, but at some point, I must have. I woke up in my bed; he must have moved me there, tucked me in. Now, an expansive quietness filled the house. I was alone.

CHAPTER 5

THE FENCE

For a long time, I lay in bed, staring at the white lumps of plaster ceiling, thinking of ghosts: of how people who were absent remained present. Dave was with me now, whispering in my ear, trying to convince me to leave town. Timothy was with me, too, though the apartment was empty, saying it would all be all right. Jennifer was there, sitting on the end of my bed, like she did the time I had pneumonia, cracking jokes and telling me I took myself too seriously sometimes. I sighed, and the ghosts blew away like so much dust in an Idaho wind.

I got up and washed my face, rubbing my fingers hard against my cheekbones to remind myself that I was solid and real. I couldn't quite believe it. The ghost world stayed with me, its phantoms still glimmering motes around me. Everything was infused with vapor and mist. Bone meant nothing now. Flesh was just another impossibility, as insubstantial as perception. Touch, smell, sight, sound, taste: all just so many fired synapses, so much nervous energy. I couldn't trust my hands to feel.

Even more impossible was Foxfire's absence. I saw visions of him burning: his mane and tail ablaze, the screaming, running endless circles in his cramped stall, no way out, no way away from the searing tongues. He exploded into cinders. I closed my eyes and shook the image out of my head. Fantasy, phantasmagoria: he would not have died like that. Perhaps the smoke knocked him out before he could feel too much pain. I hoped so. Nonetheless, he was gone: all

that remained was ash, indistinguishable from the ash of the barn, the ash of the hay, the ash of the stall bedding—the ash of all the flammables that surrounded him.

I walked to my living room, trying to focus on the reality of my feet, watching them as I walked: fat, skinny, fat: the shifts of weight as I moved forward dispersed through tarsus, metatarsus, phalanges. I resolved myself to the business of the day. I picked up the phone and sat on my sofa, trying to plan whom to call first. I dialed.

Dawn, then Jenny, then Connie: I told them to meet me at my house at three. I didn't ask them, I told them. Then Timothy, apologizing for yesterday to his machine, glad he wasn't home because I didn't know what else to say. My parents, to tell them what had happened and listen to their condolences. Finally, Eddie. "I want to buy Zephyr."

"Joan?"

"I want to buy Zephyr. What's her price?"

"I don't even know if I'm selling her."

"You'll sell anything for the price; you've told me that a million times." It was his old joke: *everything I own is for sale, except my body, and that's negotiable.*

"OK, but I haven't set a price."

"Well, when you do, let me know, because if I can find the money, I'm buying her."

"Joan." Eddie was silent a moment. "Joan, aren't you rushing this a bit? I mean, you're upset about Foxy right now. Don't you think you should wait a while? Let the dust settle and give yourself time to think things through?"

I swallowed hard. "Eddie," I started, then paused, then started again. "Yes, I've got a lot of shit to sort through, that I won't deny. But I know one thing finally and absolutely: I want to own Zephyr, and I want to be a better owner to her than I was to Foxy."

“You were a great owner for Foxy.”

“Not when it mattered.”

Again, we were silent.

“Anyway,” I finally said, “that doesn’t matter. The point is, the horse has talent, but she isn’t suitable for many riders. Yeah, you could make a brood mare out of her, but who knows what kind of mother she’d be, or if she’s even fertile. I can make something out of her, and you’d be our trainer.” I paused a beat. “Eddie, she could be a grand prix horse. We could take her there.” I was laying my cards too flat on the table, going about this irrationally, giving him all the incentive he needed to jack up the price. I’d shown all my desperation, my desire, my assessment of her ability—but he would have known it all already. Eddie could always read me the way he read the horses he rode.

I put my destiny in his hands and hung up the phone.

Then, for a long time, I just sat on the sofa. Without Foxfire to ride, without a barn to go to, I did not know what to do with myself. I couldn’t even remember what I normally did on a Sunday morning. Finally, I pulled on a fleece, tights and running shoes, and hit the road. I ran harder, faster than I’d ever run, the cold burning in my lungs with each gasped breath. Lactic acid flooded my muscles, the burning there different from the burn of my lungs, but yet I ran on. I ran down Mountain View Road, out past the park, out of Moscow all together and up the base of the Mountain. I ran on roads I didn’t know. When they forked, I chose the steepest route, muscles fighting gravity to climb.

It was a cold day—brutally cold—and as I ascended, it grew colder. My face, hot under the skin from coursing blood, stung against the bitter air. Tears formed in my eyes but stayed put. Out among the pines, the wind was still and snow began to fall. It felt like the ash had

fallen yesterday, slowly and methodically, but more pure. As it landed, it disappeared, melting into the gravel of the road as if it had never been.

A mile or two up the hill, at a turn in the road, I stopped and looked out over Moscow. I stooped, resting my hands on my knees and panting for air. From here, even at this relatively slight elevation, even through the falling snow, I could see right over the town to the wheat fields on the other side. So small. Barely the “city” it called itself. The Kibbie Dome, pride of the Vandals and the first domed stadium in the country, sat like a squat airplane hanger, the gold and black block pattern of its painted façade as sun-faded as it had always been. Houses hid among the bare branches of tree-lined streets. The few water towers and grain elevators reached as high as anything in the town, except perhaps the campus smoke stack, now plumed with white smoke, burning the logs dropped off by the truckload to heat the University. On the west side of town, what passed for a mall stretched alongside the Pullman Highway. A few two and three story buildings, circa 1920, loomed over Main Street. Across from the spire of the Methodist church, the high school, a three-story building, poked through the barren trees on Third. It looked like nothing much. Nothing anyone would seek out: not a postcard town. But my hometown. *I could leave it any time I liked*, I thought, but I knew that wasn’t true, that I could never leave it, that even when I’d moved away, I’d never left it.

I walked a few steps down the mountain and broke into a jog again, then a run: running back to everything I’d ever wanted to leave.

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Some water, some lunch, a quick shower, a little straightening, a pot of coffee brewing. Three o’clock: Dawn arrived first. She was barely in the door when she wrapped her arms around me, the snow of her coat dampening my dry sweater. It was the first human contact I’d

had since Timothy had left the night before, and I leaned into it, letting her help hold me up for just that brief moment before I stood again on my own. “I’m so sorry about Foxy.”

“Don’t say it,” I said, my voice low and choked as Dawn’s had been. “I’m barely holding it together here.”

Dawn patted my back and pulled away. I took her coat and poured her coffee. I’d made it strong—even stronger than usual. I figured we all could use it. Especially after what I had to say. Dawn looked at it for a moment, considering, and I realized that I might have made the wrong drink. I knew nothing of pregnant women, but could they have caffeine? I’d half-forgotten she was pregnant. I hadn’t given it a thought when I made the pot. Dawn poured herself a cup but added a good dose of cream and sugar to her mug. She took a long lingering sip. “Jenny called me this morning,” she said. “Dave never came home last night.”

I looked at her. “She didn’t mention that when I called her.”

Dawn shrugged. “You weren’t exactly talkative this morning. ‘Come over at three,’ click.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s ok. Jenny probably also just figured you have enough to worry about after the fire.”

I gulped my coffee unsteadily, my hand barely steady enough to hold the mug to my lips. Connie knocked, Jenny coming down the walk behind her. I took coats, handed out mugs, and directed them to the coffee, the cream and sugar. With everyone there, my tongue felt numb and fat in my mouth.

We sat on the sofa, and they looked at me. I put my mug on the table so they would not notice my shaking hands. I smoothed my jeans, then looked at them. Connie’s face was flushed, and though she wasn’t drunk—or didn’t look drunk—I figured she’d chased off this morning’s

hangover with just a little hair of the dog. I ran my thumbs over my calloused index fingers, trying to find words. “I have to tell you guys something, but I have no idea how to say it.”

Jenny looked down and stirred her coffee. Connie said, “is it about yesterday?”

I closed my eyes. “It’s about yesterday, it’s about last year.” I looked at Jenny not looking at me, and started to wonder why she was looking away, why she was so speechless. I cleared my throat. “It started last year, that is. Right after I got home. Dawn, you remember taking me out to Yosemite Dick’s that night? We got beer, you had to go to pick up Russ, I stayed to drink the pitcher.” (Dawn nodded.) “Well, I met a guy that night. He seemed nice. We hung out a while, had a fling for a couple of weeks.” I looked down at my coffee mug. “It was Dave, Jenny’s Dave.” I let this sink in a moment. The room was still. Dawn and Connie stared at me, speechless, but Jenny continued to look away. I wasn’t telling the story well. “Of course, I didn’t know it was Jenny’s Dave. I didn’t even know there was a Jenny, or else, I swear, I never would have gone out with him.” I looked squarely at Jenny as I said this, but she still didn’t look at me.

“Anyway,” I continued, “when I found out there was a Jenny, that he was married, I broke things off. Or we both did, I should say.” I would offer Jenny whatever comfort I could. “Except, that when we met again, that first night at El Mercado’s, I don’t know what happened, but he started calling again. I didn’t encourage him, but he came by work to talk to me, he watched me in the parking lot at work, at home.” I hated this, the pain I caused with every sentence. I couldn’t think how to dull the blades of my words. “He saw me talking to Timothy at the store one day and lost it. That’s why I didn’t tell you all about Timothy earlier. I was afraid of Dave knowing. I was afraid of what he’d do.”

Connie, who still didn't know about Timothy unless the girls said something on the trail yesterday morning, was looking thoroughly perplexed. I didn't try to clarify. Still, no one spoke, so I continued. "When we all went to El Mercado's Friday night and I introduced him to you guys, I was hoping to set Dave to rights, to let him know that things were over. But," I didn't know how to finish the thought.

Dawn was looking at me, jaw dropped. "You think Dave set that fire?"

I looked again at Connie. "The truck," she said.

"I think it was Dave's truck."

Jenny stood, picked up her coffee, and walked out. It wasn't the reaction I thought she would have. I thought she'd call me a liar. I thought she'd punch me in the face—I deserved a punch in the face. I followed her into the kitchen. "Jenny," I said, but did not know what to say next. "Jenny, I'm sorry."

Jenny set her mug, still full of coffee, in the sink and stood there for a minute, back to me. I wanted to explain myself, but what else could I say? I watched her. She turned to me, but still would not look at me. Her silence was more terrible than her words could have been. At least, if she'd accuse me of something, I could rally into defense. Her silence left me powerless. I stepped back. She took her coat and purse and walked out.

Dawn and Connie were behind me. I turned to face them. "It's all my fault," I said. "Foxy, the barn, Dave. I never thought it would happen, but it's all my fault."

Connie looked away, but Dawn held my eyes. "Why didn't you tell me any of this?"

"I didn't want anyone to know." I held my hands out, open-palmed. "I just wanted it to end. But not like this." I looked at the door Jenny had just walked through. "Do you think Jenny knew?"

Connie cleared her throat, “I think I’m going to get going for now. I’ve got to get back on the line with the insurance people and see about getting a new barn built.” Her tone was level and unforgiving.

“You have a place for Soldier Bill?” I asked.

“I hauled him out to Eddie’s last night. No indoor, but I guess he can have the winter off.”

“And Sunny?” I looked at Dawn, but she didn’t answer.

“He’s going to her neighbor’s to be pasture boarded,” Connie said.

“Zephyr’s at Eddie’s,” I said. “I’ll call some of the barns with indoors. I’ll find us a place to ride.”

“No, I’ll do that,” Connie smiled weakly. “I need things to do, and I know most of the other barn folks around here—and not just as the person who beats all their riders at the shows,” she raised her brows as she said this, and I wondered if she was teasing me, if things might be ok.

“Well, they might be more sympathetic now that I don’t have a horse to show.” My voice was unexpectedly bitter. Dawn’s arms, which had been crossed over her chest, dropped to her sides.

Connie looked at me. “You’ve got Zephyr.”

I said nothing.

“Eddie told me you offered to buy him.”

Dawn stared at me, her eyes asking me if I had lost my mind. *Yes, I wanted to tell her. When I lost Foxy, I lost my mind; I lost everything.*

“Eddie doesn’t know if he’s selling,” I said.

“He’ll sell.” She buttoned her coat. “And he’ll make you a good deal. You don’t know how torn up he is about Foxfire.”

I dropped my head and looked away. I closed my eyes and willed the tears back. I cleared my throat and asked Connie for the card of the detective in charge of the case so I could call and tell him what I knew. This was an arson case, and I didn’t want Connie to be suspected. It wasn’t her fault; it was mine.

Connie and Dawn walked to the door. I put my hand on Dawn’s shoulder. “I should have told you,” I said. She looked away and slid from under my hand. They walked through the door, letting in a blast of cold and silence.

3:20, and now the truth was out. I called the detective and told him what I had told the girls. It was easier with this stranger. Finally, I put *Magnum Force* in the VCR and refilled my coffee. I could live like this, I reminded myself. Perhaps it would be better if I did. Safer for everyone. I could pass my time with work, with riding, with watching the movies I’d watched once with others. All it would require was a little strength, a little resolution. No one would miss me much. I would just drop out of their lives to live only my own.

*

I didn’t hear from Dawn again for quite some time. The commute to Eddie’s was long and icy. Eddie had jerry-rigged some floodlights onto the fence rails to light one end of the small arena so that I could ride after work. I didn’t often turn them on, preferring to ride Zephyr by starlight. If the moon was full and rose early enough, I took her out, over the hills. With the moonlight reflecting on the snow, it was nearly as bright as day. Sometimes, Eddie would join me, riding one of his other horses. More often, I rode alone. We didn’t jump—couldn’t jump out here without risking injury—but it didn’t matter. I never thought of shows now.

At work, things seemed to have settled back into a mollified groove. Cheryl and I did our best to pretend we didn't hate each other, which I believe is what is meant by "professionalism." Outside of work related-topics (which patient was next, what views were needed), we didn't speak. I'd like to say this made Imaging a much nicer place to be, but after the first few days, the coldness began to wear on me. Dr. Rivers never came into our part of the building anymore. I only saw him when I was paged to ER for x-rays, where he treated me with the callous indifference that marked our early relationship. In short, I'd made all my friends and colleagues hate me to one degree or another.

Timothy had gone home for Thanksgiving, joking that Indians, even half breeds, shouldn't mix with whites on Thanksgiving: bad things came of it. I was working anyway. Friday, I went to my parents for liberal portions of leftover free range turkey and home grown yams. Dinner was delicious but uncomfortable, my parents darting quick looks at me to make sure I was ok: caring, yes, but also a constant reminder that Foxfire was gone and I was in mourning.

The moose were in the yard again, nosing the snow from the tree branches as they searched for food. I watched them as I shoveled in gravy-covered Brussels sprouts. I couldn't remember a quieter Thanksgiving. Everyone silent, afraid of what they might say. Every word, a possible route to Foxfire. I broke the peace. "I'm going to buy Zephyr," I said, "if Eddie will sell."

"That horse you're training?" My mother's face flexed with concern. "She sounded dangerous." My father said nothing, but his face showed signs of worry: his eyes searching my face for signs of what I was thinking.

"She's a lot better," I said, then laughed, "she hasn't even kicked me in a week."

This last comment did not raise a chuckle from either of my parents. They kept staring at me: their daughter who'd lost it. I could sense their questions: Why this horse? Had Foxy's death hit me harder than I'd admitted? Was I choosing a horse that would hurt me because of latent guilt, overwhelming sadness? They knew how much riding had meant to me—how much riding Foxy had meant to me—and it showed now in their reserve.

I took a sip of hot tea. "She's good. She's not tractable, but she has ability, even more than Foxy had. I think she'll be able to jump big fences, and there aren't a lot of horses out there who have that ability. She's just a natural athlete."

Their faces didn't change: my parents were not convinced.

I continued. "The thing is, athletic horses aren't cheap. Eddie could never believe we found Foxy up here—in other places, he would have been more than we could afford. He would have been a big time show horse."

"He was a show horse," my father said. "You showed him."

"I showed him in little shows. I'm talking bigger: shows with hundreds of competitors all riding top horses, trained by top people." I moved a piece of turkey through the pool of gravy where my brussel sprouts had been. How could I explain this to my parents when they'd never seen it? The multi-ring shows, the money. Kids with a string of show ponies and their own groom, dressed to the nines in custom boots, custom jackets, breeches that alone cost more than all my old show clothes had cost together. Kids who didn't go to school because they were too busy riding, whose parents got them tutors who would travel the show circuit with them: New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania in the summer, Wellington and West Palm in the winter. I'd read *Practical Horseman* every month since I was thirteen, and I didn't know those people were out there until I'd lived with them. Foxy could have been an amateur owner's horse, one of

many. Sequestered in a well-strawed loosebox, polished to a high gloss by twice daily rag rubdowns, he would have glowed in that life. So steady and talented, he would have brought ribbons, won commendation. Until my final failure, I thought I'd given him a better life, a life of galloping in pastures, eating grass, and just being a horse. But that was the world I was competing against, and those people didn't talent slip by when a few hundred thousand could buy it for their own barns.

I looked up at my parents. "I think Zephyr has the talent for the grand prix. She jumps even better than Foxy." I let that sink in a moment, then said, "grand prix horses tend to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. I'm never going to have that kind of money. If I want to be at that level, I need a horse with talent, but I also need a horse with enough problems that I can afford her. That's Zephyr."

I kept talking, growing angry that they still looked doubtful. My voice grew and edge and honed it on the stone of each argument. "On top of that, she's a mare, and chances are, she'll be able to throw some good foals. Not only can I compete with her now, but she could be the mother of a line of horses I could work with." I took a bite and began to slice another. They needed to trust me, to believe in me. If they didn't, then I really was alone. "This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I know everyone thinks I'm jumping in too early, that I should give myself time to mourn Foxfire, but shit, all I do is mourn Foxfire. I need to do something."

"It's only been a week," my mother said quietly.

My father put up his hand to stop her and looked again at me, his eyes as searching as a hawk's. He let his hand fall to the table. "It's Joannie's call."

I looked at them, then back at my plate. It was all moot. "Don't worry too much. Who knows if Eddie will even sell? He knows what he's got, and he knows he was lucky to stumble

across her. I'm asking a lot, asking him to let her go again before she's even proved herself. Another year or two of training, and he could make a bundle on her."

"Can you afford her now?" my mother asked, always practical.

"We'll see."

*

It was Sunday when Timothy came back. By then I'd heard from Connie: they'd found Dave's body in the truck. He'd died watching Foxy die.

Over the weekend, I'd been doing a lot of thinking. I thought of all the people I'd pissed off over the years, and all the harm I'd caused: Jennifer, Jenny, Dave. Two people dead because of me. Another crushed. And Connie and Dawn, who had partially forgiven but wouldn't forget. My parents who stretched all their faith to believe I hadn't gone mad, who loved me in spite of the hurt I'd cause them: leaving them for New Jersey, coming back only to ride a horse that could kill me, wanting to buy that horse. Suicidal, as they saw it.

If I stayed with Timothy, wouldn't he eventually be just another member on the list of people I tested, the people I'd failed. Look at what I'd already put him through: the saga with Dave and its bitter end. Through it all, he'd stuck by me, but I didn't want to add Timothy to the list of people who hated me. I couldn't see him there. I couldn't bear to make him hate me—I thought that really might make me go mad. Riding Zephyr on Friday, Saturday, and that morning, I'd thought about all this: I was better cut out for dealing with animals than people. I thought about his joke: white people and Indians shouldn't be together at Thanksgiving. Maybe cowboys and Indians didn't belong together at any time: maybe I was bad for him. Maybe without me, he'd have more time for his dream, for college. And me? I was one for relationships where power was apparent and palpable, a mental strength against a physical

strength—or, when it worked, a mental strength combining with a physical strength. I liked the wordlessness of it all. Words felt like part of the problem.

I didn't explain all this. When he called Sunday night, I simply told him that I didn't think we should see each other anymore. That old cliché. He was silent for a long time; I listened to his silence. Finally: "you're breaking up with me."

I swallowed the bluntness of that phrase, choked it down. "Look what I've already put you through. You need to focus on school. You have to admit, I've been a distraction."

"A distraction I never wanted to be without."

It was a romantic thing to say—the perfect thing to say—so I pretended not to have heard him say it. I pretended that words meant nothing. "I mean, with Dave and all, look at what I've put you through."

"Is it because of Dave that you're breaking up with me?"

I stared at the calendar on the wall, the blank squares of days. "What does that mean?" I wanted this over quickly so that I could see it to the end. I doubted my strength to carry out my resolve.

"Are you still hung up on him? Is it because he'd dead that you want to break up?"

I almost told the truth. I almost said no. My mouth twisted itself, folded inward. I said, "I loved Dave." The words spilled out, small and fragile. I thought for a moment that Timothy would hear the insincerity in them, and I knew that, if he did, I would crumple.

Instead, he was quiet a very long time. I realized he was waiting, but there wasn't a thing I could say. If I spoke, I'd betray myself. I wouldn't be able to make him go. It was only the phone, the facelessness, the sightlessness, that allowed him to believe me. One look at my eyes, one touch of my shaking hand, and my lie would have been known for what it was.

Timothy spoke: “Well, if that’s the case, I guess there is no more to say.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry for loving someone,” Timothy said, the words catching in his throat as he spoke them. And then he hung up.

For minutes, I stood with the phone to my ear, listening to the dead line, hearing over and over those final half-choked words. I did not re-cradle the phone but carried it with me to the VCR, sliding in *The Enforcer*, the next *Dirty Harry*. I held the receiver in hand, signaling that it was off the hook. I was unable to press the button to hang up the phone. That night, I slept with it on the pillow next to mine, the pillow where, only a few nights ago, Timothy had slept. Its angry, consistent tone and my haggard, consistent breath were the only sounds in my apartment. There was no one there to touch or to be touched by, no one there to hurt. I pushed the phone off the pillow onto the floor, and closed my eyes against its voice.

*

Monday, I tried to suppress emotion and thought altogether. My eyeballs were dry and swollen from the emotion of the last few days. Now, I willed myself an automaton. In the morning, I did extra sets at the gym, hoping muscle fatigue would help me sleep that night. At work, Dr. Rivers paged me to ER to do chest x-rays on a possible heart attack, and I made myself not think about the ways hearts stopped, the ways they accumulated and accumulated the fats of foreign bodies until they couldn’t fit in any more. But there it was, nonetheless: I envisioned Dave lining one artery, Foxy another, Jenny here, Dr. Rivers there, Dawn, Connie, my parents, and finally Timothy. I wanted him there more than anything in that moment, but how much could one heart take? My heart just wasn’t big enough.

Tuesday's lesson: Jenny was out before me, riding Hobbes. She said nothing to me, and I didn't force conversation. If she ever spoke to me again, it would be on her terms. Still, part of me felt she owed me some gratitude. I'd done her a favor. She was no longer tied to a man who didn't love her like she deserved to be loved. Like Timothy, she was free. No one would thank me for those acts, despite the costs they'd exacted. I used the anger as an internal armor, its metal plating underneath my skin, protective. When she glared at me, it reflected away. I returned my own dead stare. She put Hobbes back to pasture and drove home.

Zephyr went well that day, making me all the more anxious for Eddie's answer.

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In the end, Eddie asked for two weeks to decide about Zephyr. I reverted into a dormant state, working, running, riding, sleeping. Saving as much of my salary as I could. I went on a ramen, water, and banana lunch regimen, keeping the total cost of lunches around fifty cents. At dinner, I aimed at more nutrition, but beans (cheap, healthy protein) became my staple, usually over rice (brown or white) and covered with steamed veggies and melted cheese. The lack of variety did not bother me. Mostly, it was a comfort. I wanted regiment and routine: the ordered life.

Outside of work conversations, lessons with Eddie, and occasional trips to my parents', I rarely spoke to anyone. I didn't need people. I needed a horse, and one didn't earn a horse without sacrifice. No movies, no meals out. No people meant no temptations. It was another reason to push Timothy out of the way. It was another reason not to call him and expose myself as a fraud. Or, that's what I told myself when fighting another bout of insomnia, the dark quiet of a sleepless night that seemed to crave to be filled with someone. The loneliness was familiar:

it was life as I'd spent most of my post-high school years, so why it felt foreign now was a mystery.

At the beginning of December, Eddie found an indoor we could trailer to for jumping practice and named Zephyr's price: six grand. It was cheap for a horse of her quality, her age, her athletic and breeding potential. Dirt cheap. A price less based on Zephyr's value than on Eddie's love for me and on the love he'd had for Foxfire. Another year, and he would have sold her for ten times the price or more, assuming she stayed sound and lived up to her promise, jumping the big fences. Still, I didn't have six grand in the bank yet. Eddie gave me a few months to put it together. I had about half of what I needed.

My intention was to go to the bank and ask for a personal loan to make up the remainder, but when my parents discovered this, they stepped in, insisting on giving me an interest-free loan of their own. I resisted at first, but not too adamantly. I was proud, but I wasn't stupid. Plus, they seemed so pleased to be able to contribute to this: their daughter's dream. How could I take that away from them, only to take money from a bank who would charge me interest to line their own coffers? I still swallowed hard when they gave me the check. Their eyes looked down with the benevolent warmth I remembered from the church vestry prints: Mary looking down on Jesus, John the Baptist looking on.

By the end of the month, Zephyr was mine. We signed papers, and I did what I never did for Foxfire: I took out an ample insurance policy on Zephyr's life. Zephyr was my shot at greatness, and I no longer took that lightly. If something happened to her, I needed a back up plan. I'd given up too much for this. I calculated her value. I made monthly payments.

Lessons with Eddie ceased to be free when I became Zephyr's owner instead of her part-time trainer, but I knew that would be the case, and I didn't mind paying. In fact, I asked him to

continue riding her a few times a week, training her as he had been, though it meant giving up a few days of my own riding time and paying an extra training fee. I wanted her improving faster than I would be able to achieve on my own, lacking Eddie's training experience and expertise. He made this up to me by asking me to exercise one or another of his schooling ponies on those days: a mutual benefit, an unpaid for ride on an easy pony.

And so it went. New Year's came and went, no resolutions. The January show went by, unattended by Zephyr or me, unattended by Jenny or Hobbes. We now put our sights on the "Jump Into Spring" schooling show held each April in Lewiston. Eddie, again, arranged for me to haul Hobbes. Jenny and I still hadn't spoken a word to each other.

I ran harder and longer, despite my hatred of the treadmill. My body, always solid, was now a machine. Breaths, pace, pumping muscle: all worked with the unthinking fluidity of greased clockwork. I imagined myself with a key in my back, wound and turning. I decided I did not need to think or feel, except to guide Zephyr over the jumping courses we began to set up in late February on the thawing hillside of Eddie's pastures. We practiced taking off from short distances, long distances, and everything in between. Zephyr jumped like she loved it; she jumped like Foxy once had, like she was made for it. Seeing the fence, her body would awaken, her neck would lift and her eye focus. Her body would remain collected, obedient to my aids, but I could feel her will pulling us to that fence. When she pushed off the ground, the power would surge from her haunches forward, and we would explode into the air and become part of the air. Zephyr: more sprite than horse.

We concentrated on gymnastics: low-level fences designed to keep her clean, round, and careful. When we did put the fences up, she only got better. There was no height that would intimidate her, no bit of gaudy trickery (neither striped bars, piles of flowers, liverpools, faux-

brick blocks) would distract her. She jumped the fence like she had something to prove, and over and over again, she proved it.

Eddie's pleasure showed after every lesson. "God damn, she's good," he'd say. Never intoning a trace of remorse for having given her up, just a beaming pleasure as she surpassed each expectation. We cleared a four foot fence with barely a hesitation on her first run. On the second, she jumped it with her characteristic disdain, as if we'd been jumping four foot fences for months or years. A moment of deliberation (were we pushing her too fast?) and Eddie bumped it up to four three. Again, she jumped it. He threw a blanket over the rails, and I rode with extra leg pressure, expecting a balk. Instead, she jumped, twisting mid-air to bite at my leg's pressure, throwing off my balance and nearly unseating me. Nearly. Eddie just laughed and smiled. He muttered something about stubborn female athletes under his breath but refused to repeat it when I pulled Zephyr to a halt. I beamed.

Still, we both knew she was untested in the ring. She loved to jump, yes, but did she love to jump more than she distrusted—hated—strangers?

Two weeks before the Spring show, Dawn called me. I'd just run in from work to change into breeches and the ring of the phone startled me as much as if I'd heard a strange voice. My phone didn't ring much any more.

Dawn's voice was nonchalant. "It's been a while," she said, "so I thought I'd see if you wanted to grab a beer and catch up."

My emotion surprised me. I cleared my throat, barely trusting it to speak. "I would fucking love that," I said. I remembered again that she was pregnant, but she'd already hung up after naming her time and place. If something had happened, she wouldn't tell me that way.

I showed up at Yosemite Dick's two hours later in dirty breeches and mud-strewn boots. My hair was sweaty and half-plastered to my head, but what did I care? Dawn had seen me looking worse. I looked around the dim bar, a few guys at the bar looked back, but no Dawn. I'd been thinking of her non-stop for two hours, barely even distracted by riding. The guys looked like frat guys, playing off their fake I.D.s by leaning casually on the bar, trying too hard to look at home. They needn't have bothered. Yosemite Dick's wasn't known for being overly scrupulous about I.D.s. They needed all the beer sales they could get.

I ordered a pitcher of Bud, unsure if I should ask for two glasses or one. I settled on two but filled only one and found a table under the old neon Miller sign. Waiting for Dawn, I watched it now just as I had watched it all those months ago when I first met Dave. Dormancy, illumination, dormancy. That's life, I thought. Life is a fucking Miller sign. The thought wasn't as depressing as it should have been. This dormancy was only as temporary as the illumination. Zephyr. I imagined up lighting up the show circuit. My next illumination, still only anticipated. I hope it ended happier than these last: Dave, Timothy, Foxfire. But I also knew that wasn't how illumination worked. It wasn't about happily ever after. It was the sudden short out, the blackness where light had been. Another fucking circle.

Dawn slapped a tall glass of ice water on the table and pulled out a chair. "You're staring at the wall, Joan."

"Sorry." I smiled and looked at her while she took her coat off. Her teased hair stood four inches off her head and glowed in the neon light of the bar. Her crisp turquoise Wranglers tight on her waist as ever (though the waist was distinctly rounded), her pressed western shirt, her lacquered nails: she looked made to be here, like this was the precise place for her to be in that precise moment in time.

Dawn, looked me in the eye, then sighed, leaned over, and pulled a piece of hay from my hair. “You look like shit warmed over,” she said.

I laughed, happy that she was there, happy that I wasn’t home in my bleak apartment watching another *Dirty Harry* movie again. “You know how it is,” I said, grinning like an idiot.

“Actually, I *don’t* know how it is. What have you been doing with yourself?”

“Working, riding.” I pointed to her water. “I was worried when you suggested a bar, but everything’s ok with the baby?”

“Peachy,” she said, her tone flat and business like. “And Timothy?”

The smile slipped from my face. I swallowed. “I broke up with him right after, well, you know.”

“What he do?”

I took a long sip: flat, tasteless. “Nothing.”

“What, he wasn’t supportive?”

“No, he was fine. He was everything he should have been. I just broke it off.”

Dawn looked as if she was about to slap me. Anger glowed around her like a halo.

“What the heck for?”

I shrugged. I didn’t want to talk about it.

“Fuck it, Joan.” Dawn shook her head, but her face broke into a smile. “I should have known.” She sipped her water and looked me in the eye. “You always did think you could do it all on your own.”

I tried to read Dawn’s expression, tried to figure out what she meant by that. “I *can* do it all on my own,” I said.

“Bullshit.” Dawn kept her eye on mine, our gazes as level as a battlefield. “You know, I was pretty damned hurt when you didn’t call me after all that happened.” Dawn’s face was pinched and red. She wasn’t giving me an inch.

“I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me.”

“Well, you were wrong.” She tapped her manicured nails against the edge of the table. “I don’t imagine it occurs to you much, but you can be wrong about a lot of things.” She paused, her eyes hard and scrutinizing. “I wanted you to call. I knew I could call you, but I wanted you to call me. After you didn’t tell me about Dave or any of that shit, I wanted that little bit of trust. I wanted that much faith in our friendship. And instead, you disappeared.”

The Miller sign went dark. “I thought I’d be the last person anyone would want to hear from.”

“You didn’t think anyone needed a friend?”

Anger welled in me. “What the hell kind of friend was I? A friend who lied, or at least, hid the truth? A friend who made a man hate her so much he burned a barn, killed her horse, killed himself? That’s a real nice kind of friend.”

Dawn stared at me and drank a long, slow sip. Her eyes were narrow, like she was hunting me down, like we were in a stand off. “We all needed a friend then. Any kind of friend.”

I narrowed my eyes, returning the challenge. “Well, if you still need one, you got one.”

“That’s all I need to know.” Dawn picked up her glass and swirled it around, the ice clinking against glass. “And you’ve got one, too. So don’t fucking forget it next time.” We were silent for several moments, still staring each other down. The guys at the bar nudged each

other. One began to approach, then turned back to his friends. I looked around and noticed that Dawn and I were the only women under forty in the place. Fantastic.

“I heard from Connie the other day,” Dawn said. “She said you bought Zephyr.”

“Yep.” A guy from the bar looked over, and I glared at him, daring him to mess with me. I was in no mood.

“Your funeral.”

I looked at Dawn. “We jumped four three the other day.”

Dawn’s jaw slackened.

“She didn’t even hesitate,” I said. “If she’ll show, she’ll be my next hope.”

“If she’ll show?”

“We don’t know how she’ll take to other horses, people watching, all that stuff.” One of the frat boys was at my elbow. I turned to him, his silly grin. “Piss off.” I said. “I’m talking to my friend.”

My expression, dead serious, wiped the smile from his face. He turned and walked away.

“Damn, Joan. A bit cold.” Dawn was spinning the cardboard beer coaster with the bottom edge of her glass.

“Like you wouldn’t have said the same.”

“He was just a kid.”

I looked at her, assessing. Perhaps she would have been kinder. A stranger, a kid.

“I’m worried about you,” she said, softened. “Tell me why you broke up with Timothy again. He seemed great.”

“He was.” I left it at that.

“And he gave up that easy. You said you wanted to break up and he just left?”

I looked at the wall, its dingy plastic paneling buckling, pulling away. “I told him I loved Dave.”

Dawn’s glass came down onto the table with a thud. “You fucking did what?” (My silence.) “*Did* you love Dave?”

“Nope.”

“Then why say it?”

I looked at her, my gaze level. “It worked, didn’t it? He didn’t come back.”

“Joan, that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Again, I said nothing.

“Christ, you’re in worse shape than I thought. You obviously need me.”

“I thought I didn’t need anyone.”

“No, you *think* you don’t need anyone. That’s a problem.”

I thought about what she said. We sat in silence for a while, the Miller sign lighting and unlighting. Dormancy, illumination, dormancy. I could get up and walk out. I could not look back. I could make it on my own.

I didn’t want to.

Endless circles. Back in the same bar with Dawn again, the same place I was the last time my life was a mess. I fucked this up last time. Here was the circle, ready for the next pass, the next turn of the clock hand. Collection, strength: gathering myself for a jump. I wanted to grow like a bone, to strengthen where I’d failed. I closed my eyes and pictured marrow. That’s where it happened, the making of bone, the mending of it. The core, the cross section, the inner circle of bone. Perhaps I could mend from this place. I looked at Dawn. “OK. What do you suggest I do?”

Dawn rolled her eyes and leaned across the table. “You *call* him.” She said it like it was easy. Like it was obvious.

“And say what?”

“And say the truth. That you were stupid. That you were wrong. That you thought you could get along without him, but you can’t.”

“I can get along without him,” I said.

Dawn looked at me. “Do you want to?”

Time stopped for a beat. I won’t say that my eyes filled or that my jaw quivered. I’ll pass over that moment, a moment of weakness. “No.”

“What was that?” Dawn held her hand cupped by her ear. “I couldn’t hear you.”

“Fuck you,” I said, and smiled, a bit sheepishly.

She leaned back in her chair and smiled back. “It’s ok to be wrong, Joan. We all are sometimes.” She nodded. “Even me. For instance, right now, I’m sorry I didn’t call you sooner.”

“Me, too,” I said. “I mean, I’m sorry I didn’t call. I should have.”

“See? Not so hard. That’s good practice.” Our glasses were empty. I wouldn’t finish this pitcher on my own. Dawn stood and slid into her coat. “Now go home and call Timothy.”

*

What’s left to tell? I called Timothy that night. His voice was surprised at first, and distant. It warmed. When I told him I’d lied about loving Dave, he breathed an audible sigh. He started to ask why I lied, but stopped mid-word. “We’re not doing this over the phone,” he said then. “I want to see you.” I didn’t need him to ask twice. I hopped in my truck and sped to his place, feeling suddenly illuminated. In his basement apartment, we talked long into the night.

He didn't ask me to promise anything, but I felt promises forming in me, growing, slowly extending within my marrow, calcifying: I would not to lie to him again, I would not hold him away. I would risk something with him, or for him. Passion: I would leave myself exposed. I would relax my guard, just as I'd learned to relax my shoulders on Zephyr, to allow her to work with me though it meant allowing her the opportunity to bite me. I would trust Timothy not to hurt me.

I'd like to say I called Jenny as well, but I didn't. She called Eddie a few days later, told him she was moving home, pulling out of the show, and asked him to sell Hobbes for her. He complied. Hobbes went to an older amateur-owner just outside of Seattle; I hear they're sweeping up awards in the three foot classes. Jenny's back in Georgia now, and I have no idea how she's doing, but I hope she's doing well, and I hope she finds someone who loves her like she deserves. Dawn gave me a little crap for not calling her at first, but eventually she laid off. I'm not sure Jenny could have forgiven me. I don't know if I'll ever fully forgive myself.

Zephyr had a terrible first show. She kicked at a kid's pony, narrowly missing it and its rider, and tore at her bridle the whole time she was in the arena, snorting like a mad thing. Perhaps I should have been furious, or at least disappointed, but I can't honestly say I was. I kept thinking of Foxfire all that day. Not missing him, but thinking of all the great rides we had before his death: the days of waving grass and sun. Maybe Zephyr will be a grand prix horse. Maybe she never will. In the mean time, there are the daily rides, and coming home to Timothy, who doesn't mind that I smell like horse or that my breeches are stained with manure and sweat, who rubs bag balm on my bruises and kisses my neck.

If Zephyr never makes it to the big time, well, Foxy and I never made it to the big time either. I don't regret that anymore. Our time together was good. When Connie's barn is

finished this fall, Zephyr and I will be back where we started: another circle. I'm collected; I'm ready to face the jump.